

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S Mystery

APRIL 2002

MAGAZINE

SISTERS

Harry and Cat and
the Case of the
Missing Gemstones
BENTLEY DADMUN

Plus...

Martin Limón

Michelle Knowlden

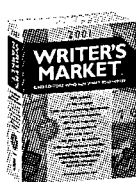
Lloyd Biggle, Jr.

U.S. / \$4.95 CAN.

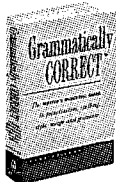


LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Discover the Secrets of Fiction Writing that Sells!



#10661-7 \$29.99 pb



#10529-6 \$19.99 hc



#10366-3 \$17.99 hc



#43449-8 \$47.97 hcs



Counts as 1 selection.



#48041-8 \$18.99 hc



#10371-3 \$19.99 hc



#10464-6 \$22.99 hc



#10483-6 \$17.99 hc



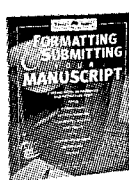
#10498-4 \$16.99 pb



#10567-6 \$17.99 hc



#10602-1 \$18.99 hc



#10618-7 \$18.99 pb



#10628-6 \$18.99 hc



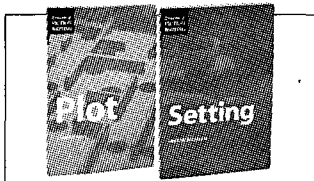
#10630-2 \$16.99 pb



#48025-1 \$18.99 hc



#48030-1 \$17.99 hc



#43396-1 \$24.00 pbs Counts as 1 selection.



#10631-0 \$18.99 hc



#48043-4 \$18.99 hc

HOW THE CLUB WORKS

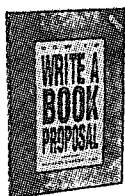
You'll receive the **BULLETIN** every four weeks (fourteen times a year) featuring the Main Selection and 100 or more of the newest and best books for writers. If you want the Main Selection, do nothing. We will send it to you automatically. If you want a different book or want nothing that month, just indicate your choice on the easy-to-use Selection Card and mail it to us. You'll always have at least 10 days to decide and return your Selection Card. However, if late mail delivery ever causes you to receive a book you don't want, you may return it at Club expense. As a new member, you are under no obligation to buy any more books—you're just trying out the Club for 9 months. After that, you may cancel at any time. Every time you buy a book from the **BULLETIN**, your membership will be renewed for 6 months from the purchase date.

AS A CLUB MEMBER, YOU'LL ENJOY:

- **DISCOUNTS FROM 15-65%** on every book you buy!
- **FREE SHIPPING AND HANDLING** on prepaid orders (after this joining offer)!
- **SATISFACTION GUARANTEED 100%!**

FREE

WITH A 3RD FOR JUST \$11.99 WHEN YOU JOIN WRITER'S DIGEST BOOK CLUB!



#10518-9 \$14.99 pb



#10710-2 \$14.99 pb



#10632-8 \$24.99 hc



#10541-1 \$19.99 pb



#10553-6 \$18.99 hc

MEMBERSHIP SAVINGS CERTIFICATE

☐ **YES!** I want to join Writer's Digest Book Club. Please sign me up and send me:

My first FREE book # _____	FREE
and my second FREE book # _____	FREE
with my third book # _____ for only _____	\$11.99
*plus shipping and handling _____	\$7.93
all for just _____	\$19.92

(Payment in U.S. funds must accompany order. In Ohio add 72¢ tax. In Canada, please provide a street address and enclose \$10.33 for shipping and handling plus \$1.56 for GST for a total of \$23.88.)

☐ Check enclosed or Charge my ☐ VISA ☐ MasterCard

Acct # Exp. Date: _____

I have read How The Club Works and understand I have no obligation to buy any more books.

Signature (required on all certificates) _____

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State/Prov. _____ ZIP/PC _____

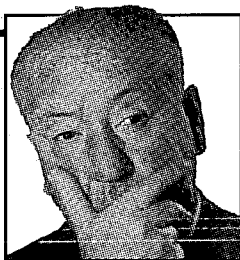
Writer's Digest
BOOK CLUB

Limited time offer good for new members in the U.S. and Canada only.
Please allow 3-4 weeks for delivery. All applications subject to approval.

P.O. Box 9274, Central Islip, NY 11722-9274

WAD02AH

CONTENTS



SHORT STORIES

THE DEVIL YOU KNOW by David Edgerley Gates	6
THE CASE OF THE WOLF WITH TWO TALES by Lloyd Biggle, Jr.	15
THE NO-BRAINER by S. L. Franklin	28
THE MYSTERIOUS MR. KIM by Martin Limón	54
SISTERS by Bentley Dadmun	66
THE FAULTLESS PAINTER by Michelle Knowlden	100
BATTLEGROUND by John M. Floyd	111

MYSTERY CLASSIC

THE MAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY by Edward Everett Hale	120
------------------------------------------------------------	------------

DEPARTMENTS

EDITOR'S NOTES	4
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH	65
UNSOLVED by Robert Kesling	98
SOLUTION TO THE MARCH "UNSOLVED"	110
BOOKED & PRINTED by Mary Cannon	140
THE STORY THAT WON	144

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE (USPS:523-590, ISSN:0002-5224), Vol. 47, No. 4, April, 2002. Published monthly except for a July/August double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. Annual subscription \$39.97 in the U.S.A. and possessions, \$49.97 elsewhere, payable in advance in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Subscription orders and correspondence regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 54011, Boulder, CO 80322-4011. Or, to subscribe, call 1-800-333-3311, ext. 4000. Editorial Offices: 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. Executive Offices: 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT, and additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Montreal, Quebec, Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260665. © 2002 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Reproduction or use, in any manner, of editorial or pictorial content without express written permission is prohibited. Submissions must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. In Canada return to Transcontinental Sub. Dept., 525 Louis Pasteur, Boucherville, Quebec, J4B 8E7. GST #R123054108.

Printed in Canada

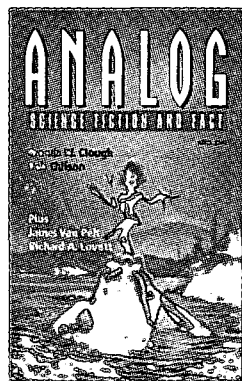
Cover by Kristina Swarner

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

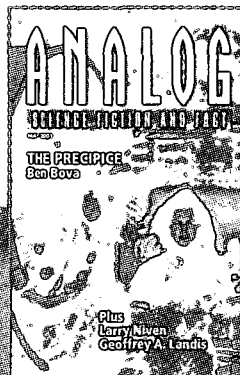
HOW THE UNIVERSE

Just
\$6.95!

Save
60%



Explore the boundaries of imagination with the Analog Science Fiction Value Pack. You get five of our most popular back issues for just \$6.95 plus shipping. That's a savings of 60% off the regular price!



Complete the order form below and mail it back to us with your payment

PENNY MARKETING

Dept. SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

☒ **YES!** Please send me my **Analog Science Fiction Value Pack**. I get 5 back issues for just \$6.95 plus \$2 shipping and handling (\$8.95 per pack, U.S. funds). My **satisfaction is fully guaranteed!** My payment of \$ _____ is enclosed.
(AFPK05)

Name: _____
(Please print)

Address: _____

City: _____

State: _____ **ZIP:** _____

Please make checks payable to Penny Marketing. Allow 8 weeks for delivery. Magazines are back issues shipped together in one package. To keep prices low we cannot make custom orders. Add \$4 additional postage for delivery outside the U.S.A. Offer expires 6/30/03.

042C-NANVL1

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

EDITORIAL NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

Our Mystery Classic in this issue, "The Man Without a Country," was first published by Edward Everett Hale in 1863, during the height of the Civil War, written (says Britannica) "to inspire greater patriotism." It was a big hit.

Although it appeared as a magazine story, it is often described as a novel, or a "short novel," but a story it is.

Hale (1822-1909) was a clergyman in Boston, where he was born, and in Worcester, Massachusetts. He wrote numerous stories and novels ("The Man Without a Country" is hands-down the most famous, though) as well as many works of nonfiction. He was chaplain of the United States Senate for the last six years of his life.

Hale's great-uncle was the Revolutionary hero and spy Nathan Hale (1755-1776), whose last

words before he was hanged by the British on Long Island, where



he'd been caught behind enemy lines, were "I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country."

Edward Everett Hale was also the nephew of the orator, clergyman, and statesman Edward Everett (1794-1865), who—after all that—is perhaps best remembered for his lengthy speech opening the dedication of the national cemetery at Gettysburg: it was followed by Lincoln's brief and matchless Gettysburg Address.

CATHEEN JORDAN, Editor

JONAS ENO-VAN FLEET, Editorial Assistant

SUSAN KENDRIOSKI, Executive Director, Art and Production

VICTORIA GREEN, Senior Art Director

JUNE LEVINE, Associate Art Director

CAROLE DIXON, Senior Production Manager

ABIGAIL BROWNING, Manager, Subsidiary Rights and Marketing

BRUCE W. SHERBOW, Vice President, Sales and Marketing

SANDY MARLOWE, Circulation Services

JULIA McEVoy, Manager, Advertising Sales

CONNIE GOON, Advertising Sales Coordinator

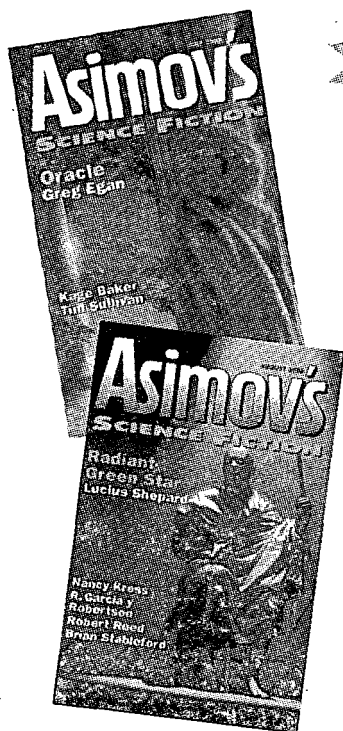
Advertising Representatives:

David Geller Publishers' Rep. (212) 455-0100 (Display Advertising)

PETER KANTER, Publisher

Visit us online at www.themysteryplace.com.

DISCOUNT TIME TRAVEL



Just \$6.95!

For 5 Classic Issues

You'll join the vanguard of science fiction when you order our **Asimov's Science Fiction Value Pack**. You get five of our most popular back issues for just \$6.95 plus shipping. **That's a savings of 60% off the regular price!**

Asimov's always delivers the most celebrated authors in the field. Share their visions now with dozens of stories that launch you into the fantastic worlds of tomorrow.

To get your **Asimov's Science Fiction Value Pack**, just complete the order form below and mail it back to us with your payment today.

PENNY MARKETING

Dept. SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220



YES! Please send me my **Asimov's Science Fiction Value Pack**. I get 5 back issues for just \$6.95 plus \$2 shipping and handling (\$8.95 per pack, U.S. funds). **My satisfaction is fully guaranteed!** My payment of \$_____ is enclosed. (IAPK05)

Name: _____

(Please print)

Address: _____

City: _____

State: _____ ZIP: _____

Please make checks payable to Penny Marketing. Allow 8 weeks for delivery. Magazines are back issues shipped together in one package. To keep prices low we cannot make custom orders. Add \$4 additional postage for delivery outside the U.S.A. Offer expires 6/30/03. 042C-NN5VL1

FICTION

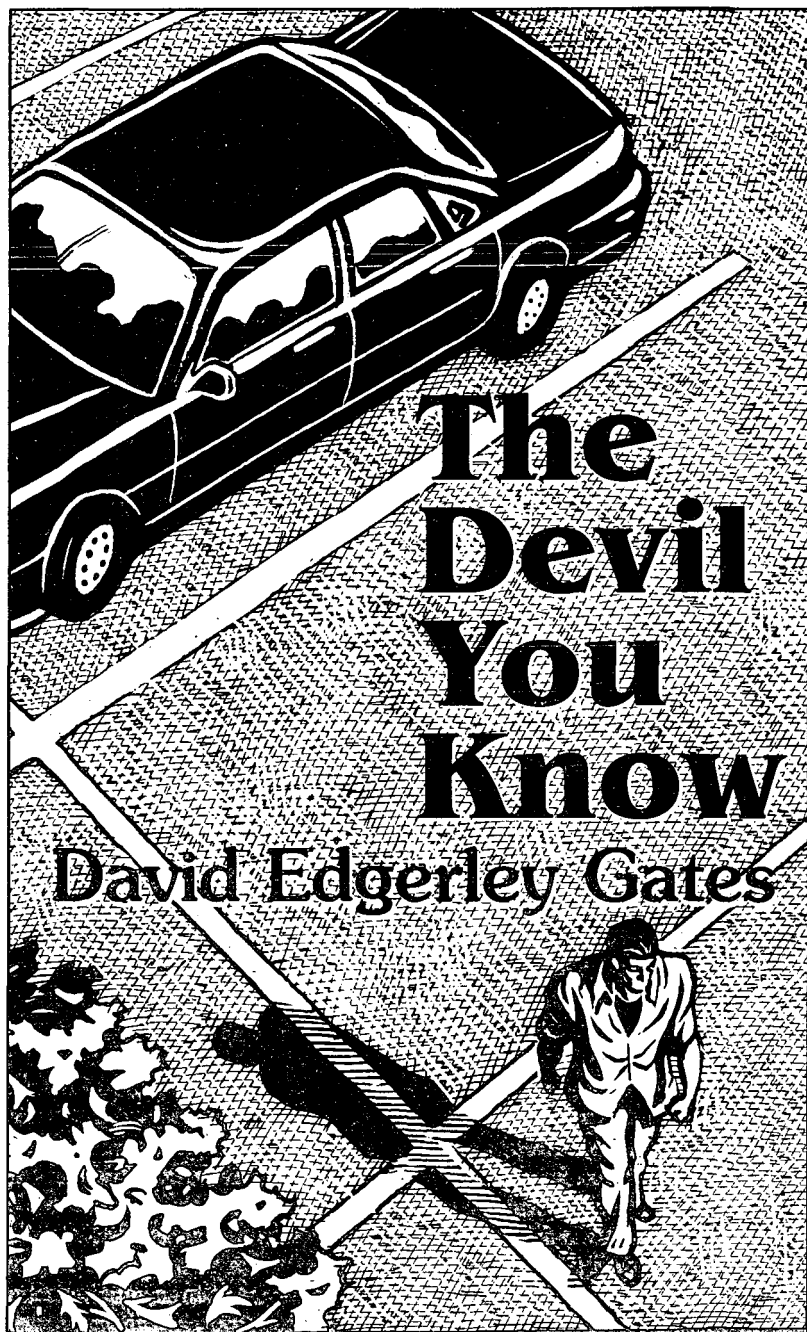


Illustration by Dan Krovatin

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG by Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 4/02
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When the deal went south, Tommy Meadows was sitting in the Astro van listening to a Gipsy Kings CD, singing along to "Volare." He had the volume cranked up, was tapping his fingers on the steering wheel, keeping time, but the music wasn't so loud he didn't hear the first two shots, close together, blam-blam, maybe a nine or a .40 Smith, and then the sharp snap-snap-snap of an assault gun like an Armalite or an M-16.

The thing is, it was supposed to be a one-off, no heavy lifting, nothing sticky, a straight trade, the phones for the money. Tommy and his brother Roy had hooked up with a computer geek named Vingo Nix, who went by the Internet handle VCHIP, which was one of those inside jokes webheads thought were cute.

Nix had switched out the memory in a couple of dozen cell phones and reprogrammed them to use stolen account numbers. The calls were untraceable. This was a hot item with street dealers. Nix didn't have the connections to move them, but Roy did. He set up a meet with the Jamaican crew known as Dread Posse, or Doctor D. Everyone knew what else the letter D stood for.

At fifteen hundred a pop, the cells were worth thirty-odd large, which meant their take-home was something over ten grand, split two for one with Nix. Easy work. We deliver. Tommy's end was driving the van. Nix and Roy took the box of cells into the warehouse. Out in five, Roy told Tommy, going in.

Not. Two more shots, spaced walking distance apart.

Tommy didn't think Roy and the geek were coming out of that warehouse. He put the pedal to the metal, burning rubber.

Brooklyn South caught the homicides, two white boys on gang turf with multiple gunshot wounds to their upper body mass, plus one tap in the head apiece, a signature. But quicker than you could say Jack Robinson, suits from the Manhattan field office of the Treasury Department were walking the crime scene perimeter, like hyenas stalking a leopard's kill.

NYPD never liked the Feds muscling in, but the lead homicide dick, a detective second grade named Babs DiMello, knew better than to swim against the current. She could stonewall, throw a hissy fit, raise hell about local jurisdiction, and none of it would make a particle of difference. In the end, the G-men would roll over her with their institutional inertia, as implacable as the movement of a glacier. Rock hammers scissors, scissors cut paper, paper wraps stone.

DiMello introduced herself to the special agent in charge.

"Chapin," he told her. "Electronic crimes task force."

She tried to look interested. Chapin didn't have to give her anything.

"You people shed any light on this incident?" she asked him.

"Cellular phones," he said.

DiMello waited, politely.

"Reprogrammed," he said. "A lifetime of free calls."

DiMello caught on.

"You figure it for a buy gone bad?" she asked.

He nodded. "Bad to worse," he said.

What she really wanted to know was how he'd gotten there so fast. She bet one of the dead guys was wearing a wire.

"Don't want to step on your toes, here, detective," Agent Chapin said, starting to turn away. "I'd appreciate it if you'd try and keep us in the loop."

"Wait a minute," DiMello said. "That's it?" Chapin turned back, looking surprised.

"I've got two murders," DiMello said. "You tell me they were killed over cell phones, and then it's wham, bam, thank you ma'am?"

"I don't have anything else for you," he said.

DiMello let it go. She knew he was shining her off, but why would Treasury have any interest in her clearance rate? She already had two domestics and a delivery guy who'd been beaten to death over thirty dollars' worth of Chinese food. Now she had a double gang killing. It never rained but it poured.

Chapin felt bad about holding out on the cop, but for the moment, his hands were tied. He couldn't tell her VCHIP had been a Treasury informant without opening a can of worms. It wasn't going to get better, either. You could hear the sound of incoming, and there weren't any foxholes to dive into.

Tommy Meadows was scared the Dreads would come after him. He'd

already ditched the Astro, which was a shame because it was clean, boosted out in Jersey somewhere and repainted, with a new VIN. Roy had paid cash for it at a chop shop in Queens. Tommy hadn't just abandoned it on the street, either. He knew the Rastas would put the word out to look for it. He'd made a deal with a couple of kids from Hempstead to dump it in a quarry, but he figured they were flaky enough to keep driving around in it. As long as the van was out on Long Island it didn't matter, and if the kids were busted, so what? They couldn't make Tommy.

The problem was closer to home. Roy and Tommy Meadows were smalltime neighborhood guys, sure, and the cell phone scam was a step up, but they were *known*. All you had to do was ask around, and somebody would give up their names. Canarsie wasn't Dread territory, but that didn't afford much protection.

What he needed was an edge. Tommy wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer—his brother Roy had done the thinking for both of them—but he had street smarts and a share of animal cunning. He wouldn't fink to the cops, it wasn't in his nature, although maybe if he'd known that Treasury wanted a piece of him, he might have tried to work something out. No, he had to figure an angle on his own.

The only crews as ruthless as the Jamaicans were the Russian crime families that operated out of Brighton Beach. They'd send your kid's tongue to your wife in a candy box, with a side of horse-

radish. And that was just persuasion. If they wanted to whack you, they put a bomb in your car, and if it took out two nuns on the sidewalk and a woman crossing the street with a baby carriage, they shrugged it off as collateral damage.

Okay, so the Russians were crazy, Tommy thought. So were the Jamaicans. And neither one of them had any use for the other. The question was how to get to the Russians. He thought he might be able to do that out.

"Okay," the M.E. said, "you got a lot of holes in these guys, mostly through-and-throughs—5.56 NATO, from the way they were torn up. The bullet tumbles when it hits soft tissue. My guess is they each took a couple of bursts."

DiMello had the receiver cradled against her left shoulder, taking notes.

"The head shots were close range. Residue on the hair and scalp. Got some fragments off the concrete. Nine-mil, probably Black Talon." He paused.

DiMello realized he expected her to comment. Black Talon rounds would penetrate a Kevlar vest, and were illegal for sale except to law enforcement. "They're gang-bangers," she said. "I'm surprised those guys didn't get sprayed with a MAC-10 or an AK. Cop-killer ammo just goes with the profile."

"You want a reconstruction?" the M.E. asked her.

Rhetorical question, DiMello figured. "Please," she said.

"I think both these guys took a

single hit from a nine, square in the chest, and a backup shooter hosed them full auto. Trajectory on the chest wounds is level, front to back, so I make them as primary. The secondary impacts are hitting them at different angles, so they were going down."

"Why the head shots?" she asked, although she knew.

"Unnecessary, but final," the M.E. said. "Trauma, blood loss, systemic shock, neither of the victims would have lasted more than a couple of minutes at most. The head shots were arbitrary."

They saved time, DiMello thought. She had two witness statements putting a vehicle outside the warehouse, and tire marks on the asphalt that forensics told her were fresh. The shooters were going after the pickup guy, whoever was waiting in the street, but he'd been smart enough to get the hell out of Dodge before they caught up with him.

"Here's something else," the M.E. said.

DiMello could guess what was coming.

"One of your victims was wearing a body mike," the M.E. told her. "Compact, low amperage, transistorized, very state of the art. Real-time transmission, no tape back-up."

Gotcha, DiMello thought. Your bony butt is *mine*, Chapin.

The guy Tommy Meadows approached was Lazar Lyubov, a bagman for the protection rackets controlled by the Odessa mafia. Tommy figured the name was pro-

nounced LAY-zar, but the guy corrected him. Lah-ZAR, he said. "Not a Jew," he told Tommy, imparting a confidence and making a point of it.

Tommy didn't care one way or the other, but it puzzled him why Lazar did. For one thing, like the old Lenny Bruce line, *everybody* in New York was Jewish. For another, there were a lot of Jews in the Russian mob.

Lazar was self-important, and a loose talker. He wanted to impress Tommy with his connections.

Tommy let him rattle on because he'd rather the Russian felt it was him, Lazar, who was doing Tommy a favor and not the other way around.

"Two dozen phones?" Lazar asked, finally getting to it.

"That's right," Tommy said.

Lazar nodded as if he were studying on it, but Tommy knew he'd already done the math. The street price for clean cell numbers was ten bucks per, and the phones were programmed with thirty numbers apiece. At times twenty-four, it came out to seventy-two hundred. "Six," Lazar said. He was talking thousands, and he was offering Tommy a twenty percent turnover.

"How about a volume discount?"

Lazar shrugged. "These are virgin, never been used," he said. "You can piggyback them a month, easy, plug-and-play. No disconnects." He meant they were active accounts and only recently compromised. Half the time when you bought stolen cell numbers the accounts were already closed.

"My guys'll be back," Tommy

said. "After they burn the first thirty numbers, they'll want thirty more. You see where I'm going with this? You shave your price, they won't shop around for a better one. You get to move the product, the money comes in on a regular basis, like rent."

Lazar saw where it was going, all right. "The phones, it's all the same client?"

"You got it."

"And who is this client, please?"

Tommy hesitated, like he was reluctant, but then he gave it up. "You heard of Dread Posse?"

Lazar stiffened. "I don't sell to those *chërnnye*," he said.

It meant blacks in Russian, but in Russian it was insulting.

"Who's gonna know?" Tommy asked him.

This was the closer. Lazar could see that easy six large a month slipping away. He took the hook. "Okay," he said.

That was the thing he'd learned about the Russians. They were unpredictable, they'd take offense at a harmless joke. But they were always looking to score. Nothing was too small. It came from waiting in line for shoes, Tommy imagined, back in the USSR before the free market.

Lazar checked his watch, a Rolex knock-off, one of those diver's models, supposed to be pressurized under water. "Call me in three hours," he said. "I set it up." Give me time to figure a way to screw you, he meant. Tommy was cool with that.

"You ready to come clean about Viggo Nix?" Babs DiMello asked.

"Sure," Chapin said. He seemed muted, like he wasn't going to put up much of a fight. DiMello was surprised.

They were on Chapin's turf, e-crime task force, Manhattan.

"He was on a wire. You hear the shooting go down?"

Chapin shook his head. "He wasn't transmitting. We caught it when it flatlined."

"Say again?"

"It's like a phone bug. You don't have to be making an actual call for the mike to pick up a nearby conversation. We outfitted Nix with a passive signal. Even when he was offline, we could check and see if the equipment was working."

"What happened?"

"Battery pack got shot to hell," Chapin said. "We showed a line fault on Viggo's electronics."

"And you knew his location?"

"Only that he was in the outer boroughs. Then we monitored your radio call. Hoped it wasn't him, but we had to check it out."

She nodded. "You have leverage on the other victim?"

"Nope. Didn't even know his name. Still don't."

"Meadows, Roy Meadows, local lowlife. Had a brother Tommy, another loser. Somebody we'd very much like to talk to."

"Look," Chapin said, "Nix was not, I repeat *not*, keeping us in the loop. Whatever he had going with Meadows, and whoever they were selling to, it was on the side."

"I'd like to believe that," DiMello said. She didn't.

"Detective, there's no way we can put the toothpaste back in the tube,

here. We've got an unhappy situation, and I'm the one who's expected to fall on his sword." No wonder he looked subdued, DiMello thought. "I spent the morning laying it out for the district chief. I'm instructed to lay it out for NYPD."

She sat back and waited.

They had leverage on Nix, yes, Chapin explained. VCHIP had been popped on a telecommunications rap, blue boxes. He agreed to flip on his clients and, better, to develop new ones. It sounded like entrapment to DiMello. No, the Treasury agent told her, not if they came to Nix first, with an offer to buy.

"And the thing with Roy Meadows?" she asked.

Chapin shrugged. "Easy money," he said.

"Tell me about the phones," DiMello said.

"You replace the memory chip. Nix made them programmable, thirty different account numbers, in rotation. That way you don't burn them up too fast. But sooner or later the customer notices a pattern of unauthorized usage and reports it to the cell company. They suspend the account. Then you go and buy a new list of stolen numbers, punch them in. That's why they call it a lifetime phone. Nix even provided instruction manuals."

"Who supplies the stolen account numbers?"

"Some of the oldtime guys have gotten in on the action, the Gambino mob, for one. But the heavy hitters are the Russian crime families."

"Little Odessa?" She meant Brighton Beach.

He nodded. "They got in early on credit card fraud," he said. "Hell, the Internet's a godsend. Security firewalls are a joke. You know, if you want to access a porn site, the site's required by law to verify your age so they ask for a major credit card. It's a gimme. Guys looking for a little T&A, they hand over the keys to the safe."

"Not your hacker stereotype, Russian gangsters."

"You think they're just goofballs wearing pocket protectors and propeller caps, you couldn't be more wrong."

"It's none of my business, Agent Chapin, but what's got you in the doghouse, exactly?" DiMello asked him.

"I signed off on Nix," he said.

"I've signed off more than once on a confidential source without giving him up to the suits," she said. "Why is it such a big deal?"

Chapin sighed. "Slight error in judgment," he told her. "Nix wanted twenty-four hour coverage, but he'd initiate. Other words, the ball was in *his* court. I gave him the cell numbers and pagers for the people on my team. Somehow it slipped my mind what VCHIP was so good at, what we had on him in the first place."

It took her a second. "Nix put a phone trap on your cells and pagers," she said, working it out. "He bugged your calls so he knew whether you had surveillance on him or not. That way he could keep on doing business but dime out the other guys."

"Yeah," Chapin said. "He gave us arrests, but most of them were his

competition. He played me like a goddamn jukebox."

The parking lot at Aqueduct was maybe three-quarters full at five thirty that afternoon. It was the right mix of public place and anonymity to make Lazar comfortable, cars coming and going but not a lot of aimless foot traffic. Nobody particularly noticed the two men in the Cadillac Seville. The sky was cloudless and twilight was still almost three hours away, so the sun was hot on the pavement. Lazar had the Seville idling, with the windows rolled up and the A/C on high. He seemed a little too jumpy.

"They'll show," Tommy said.

"Yeah, yeah," Lazar said, trying to act his part. He was wearing big aviator shades like he was Superfly, but Tommy knew Lazar was wound up about something.

"How many people are in on this?" Tommy asked.

"Just the two of us," Lazar said, but fidgeting. "The guy, he supply the numbers, he don't know who the buyer is."

Tommy figured this for smoke. Lazar was bush. His people wouldn't let him have seven hundred subscriber numbers on credit without knowing where the money was supposed to come from. It was too much weight, and Lazar was too far down the Russian food chain. Tommy was the one working off the ground without a net.

"How soon they coming?" Lazar asked.

Tommy made a show of checking his watch.

"Soon," he said.

"I don't like be kept waiting," Lazar said.

"You not be kept waiting," Tommy said, mimicking him.

Lazar didn't seem to notice. "Is bad manners, disrespect," he said, "be kept waiting."

Is bad manners to figure on beating me for the commission, too, Tommy thought. He knew damn well that the reason Lazar had invited himself along was so he could cut a separate deal with the Dreads. Not today, but next time around. If it were going to be a once-a-month buy, what did Lazar need Tommy for? Not that it made any difference, since no Rastas were planning to show at the track this afternoon anyway. Tommy knew that for a fact.

"Anything?" Lazar asked.

Tommy looked around. There was nobody in sight between the parked cars, which made it as good a time as any.

"They not coming," Lazar said.

Tommy looked past him, out the driver's side window. "Over there," he said. "Think that's them?"

Lazar twisted in his seat to look. "Where?" he asked.

Tommy took the .380 Astra out from the small of his back, where he'd tucked it under his shirt. It was Roy's gun, bought for cheap in Bed-Stuy. "By that lightpole," Tommy said, and Lazar twisted around farther, squinting through the window.

Tommy had never clipped anybody before, and to his credit he felt shaky, but it was do it now or not at all. He took a deep breath, brought the gun up two-handed, the muzzle

pointing just behind Lazar's right ear below the mastoid bone, notched the hammer back with his left thumb, and shot the Russian in the back of the head from four inches away.

The report was so loud inside the car, with its windows sealed, that he almost dropped the gun. He steadied it again and shot Lazar a second time. The window glass starred. He felt in the dead man's pockets and got out the Zip disk. He wasn't dumb enough to try to sell the stolen numbers. He'd dump the disk when he dumped the gun.

Tommy glanced around and still didn't see anyone nearby. He wiped down the dash and the seat and the inside door handles and got out of the car. He felt light-headed.

He slammed the car door with his hip and started across the parking lot, but taking his time. The subway was only a block away.

"So, we got?" the lieutenant asked her.

"We got zero," Babs DiMello told him. "We got no I.D. on the shooters, we got nothing off ballistics, we don't know it was the Dreads—" She spread her hands, a philosophical gesture. "We *do* know it was the Dreads," she corrected herself, "but we can't tie them to Nix and Meadows."

"You're going to have to do better than that, Babs," the lieutenant said. "What about this what's-his-name, at Treasury? He stiff you or give it up?"

"He gave it up," she said. "What there was of it. He's in Dutch with his own higher ranks."

"What's that about?"

She told him about VCHIP tapping the Feds.

"Sheesh," he said. "What's the bottom line?"

She told him about the lifetime phones.

The lieutenant stared at her, looking old and weary. "We got Dread mules and runners packing untraceable cells, we got a pair of not-so-civilian casualties, and we got a gang war set to heat up," he said. "You heard about the thing in Queens?"

She nodded. He meant the murder at Aqueduct.

"Easy to figure it's connected," the lieutenant said. "Tip of the iceberg. You can liaise with Queens homicide."

"Fine by me," DiMello said.

"There's going to be a bloodbath, you know," he said.

"Maybe it'll clean out the gene pool," she said.

Her partner rapped on the open door and stepped into the lieutenant's office. He was a young guy named Pete Beeks.

"Guess who just walked in downstairs?" he asked them, with a big grin. "None other than Tommy Meadows, lawyer in tow."

"You're shining me," DiMello said, amazed.

He shook his head, still grinning. "Nope," he said. "He's in holding."

DiMello exchanged glances with the lieutenant. "Let's go," she said to Beeks.

And they went.

The interview lasted an hour and

a half, but all Tommy Meadows could tell them was that he'd driven his brother and Viggo Nix to the warehouse. He never saw the other guys, although his brother had told him they were meeting Dread Posse. When the shooting started, Tommy booked. Yeah, he got rid of the van, offed it on a couple of punk wannabes. He was happy to give up their names. Tommy told the same story four times, and since he was telling the truth, and hadn't rehearsed the details ahead of time, it hung together. DiMello and Beeks bought it.

"He goes down on accessory, it's three to five," Beeks said to her out in the corridor.

DiMello shook her head. "He won't even do that," she said. "The phones weren't stolen. Nix bought them wholesale. Roy picked up the van. Even if we get Jersey to trace it, which is probably a dry hole, Tommy can just play dumb. He didn't know it was hot. He ditched it afterwards so the Dreads wouldn't find him. What's he looking at? Obstruction, maybe. But he came in, right? Which counts in his favor. He pleads down, the most he does is eighteen months tops."

"Better than walking into a bullet."

DiMello shrugged. "He probably figures it's safer in the joint, what with the Dreads and the Russians whacking each other out right and left," she said. "Tommy's not even a player."

They both knew the body count had only just begun.

FICTION

THE CASE OF THE WOLF WITH TWO TALES



Lloyd Biggle, Jr.



In the gathering darkness, the River Thames looked like a broad, dark high road, which of course it was. We were gathered on the dimly lit roof of a riverbank warehouse on the Surrey side, with the bulk of the City of London across the river and to our northwest. The nightglow of the vast metropolis was just forming in the newly settled darkness. To our left the lights of Tower Bridge formed a shining barricade across the river, and while I watched, it raised its bascules to allow a brightly lighted freighter to pass. Tugboats, ornamented with green and red running lights, pursued their own anonymous errands. The few wharves where freighters were still unloading were flooded with light.

The incessant swish of the river reached us faintly. Occasionally a ship's hooter sounded a hoarse warning—for no reason discernible to us. From the street behind us, the clatter of horses' hooves came and went.

The sensation I felt was that of someone perched on the rim of a volcano waiting for an eruption, which was silly. The eruption had already occurred. That vast metropolis across the river was tense with a fear it had not experienced since the days of Jack the Ripper more than a decade before, and each night the descent of darkness plunged it into terror.

Chief Inspector Mewer began pacing back and forth as if calculating the roof's dimensions. Professor Carnley, the Canadian zoologist who was our expert consultant for the night, relaxed in the chair provided for him, head tilted back as though the gentle breezes were already bringing him clues too delicate for a nonzoologist's coarse perceptions to grasp. Lady Sara Varnley, Britain's finest detective, also occupied a chair and waited calmly.

The other member of our party, Mr. Charles Elcock, was fussing with the dark lantern he had brought in case the dim light the Chief Inspector provided proved inadequate. He also kept checking and rechecking his equipment. His antics were irritating the Chief Inspector, who had little confidence in university professors and even less in machines.

Suddenly I heard it—a long, eerie, melancholy note. Its beginning had been strangely muffled, and it seemed without end. It simply went on and on. It was unspeakably sad and uncanny, and it was terrifying London—in part because it was so unusual. That sound had not been heard in remote parts of Britain since the seventeenth century nor in the vicinity of London for more centuries than anyone cared to count: the howl of a wild wolf.

Elcock had gone into action immediately. His equipment, in addition to his dark lantern, consisted of a gramophone, one capable of recording sound, and he directed its curved horn toward the wolf call and set its cylinder turning.

The Chief Inspector halted his pacing and stood searching the distant black, light-speckled shore for the sound's invisible source. Lady Sara did not move. The Professor leaned back, hands folded against his chest, and listened with a faint smile on his face.



The chilling sound continued. I could understand the terror a wolf's howl inspired in a lone traveler in wild country. Heard in the heart of London it was horrifying enough—especially in a London already seized by panic. During the past ten days the wolf had howled on five nights; each night a woman had disappeared.

The howl broke off abruptly. Once again the night was filled with the mundane sounds of the river. They had continued all along, of course, but as we strained to hear the wolf, we had been unaware of them.

Chief Inspector Mewer strode over to Professor Carnley. As soon as he made certain that Elcock had stopped his recording machine, he demanded, "Well?"

Before the Professor could answer, the cry began again. It started on a lower pitch, rose abruptly, and then continued as the same eerie wail we had heard before. It did not seem loud, but it was carrying an enormous distance—not only across the Thames but throughout much of the East End of London.

The Chief Inspector turned away. Nothing more was said until the wolf's howl broke off a second time and Elcock had stopped his recording machine again. "Is it a wolf?" Chief Inspector Mewer demanded.

"It is undoubtedly a wolf's howl," Professor Carnley answered carefully.

The Chief Inspector stared at him. "Why do you put that way?"

"It is a wolf's howl, but no wolf made it. It was made by a human, probably a man who has spent considerable time listening to wolves and has a gift for mimicry. It wouldn't fool anyone who has heard wolves howling in the wild. It is a thin wail rather than the rich, full-throated howl of a wolf."

"Are you telling me this whole show is a fake?"

"About the whole show I wouldn't know. The wolf's howl is certainly a fake."

In one corner of the roof was a stairway with an enclosed stairwell. We turned our attention to it as clumping footsteps approached the top. It was a recently promoted detective who had not yet managed to break the walking habit he'd acquired through years of plodding a beat.

He spoke to the Chief Inspector. "Inspector Hardy telephoned, sir."

"Yes?"

"There's another woman missing."

All of us were staggered. The night was peaceful. Lives seemed to be going their routine ways—on the river and, as far as we could tell, in the shadowy city beyond it.

The constable added, "Inspector Hardy thinks they've got the building surrounded where the wolf was howling. It's a warehouse right on the river."

"Let me know at once if he telephones again," the Chief Inspector said.

The constable clumped back down the stairs. Mr. Elcock asked, "Would you like to hear it?"



"Wait," the Chief Inspector said. "We don't know that the performance is over. I hope he'll go right on howling until Hardy's men nab him."

"What will you charge him with?" Lady Sara asked, a note of amusement in her voice. "Howling at the moon to the embarrassment of the Metropolitan Police?"

"If he is kidnapping a woman each time he howls—"

"But there's no evidence that he has any connection with that. If he were howling at the time of the disappearances, he has an unimpeachable alibi."

"He has certainly made a public nuisance of himself and caused inconvenience to a lot of people. We're not going to just turn him loose and tell him to be good."

"Perhaps you should wait until you catch him before deciding."

The Chief Inspector was silent.

All of us waited in silence. The minutes seemed frozen; clocks no longer measured time. Finally the constable clumped back up the stairway.

"Inspector Hardy called again. They searched that warehouse, but there was no one there. The Inspector still thinks its roof was the place where the wolf was howling. He can't understand how it got away. He had his men all set with nets to capture it."

"How do they know it was the right place if the wolf was gone?" the Chief Inspector asked. "Did they find anything at all?"

The constable coughed discreetly. He sounded apologetic when he spoke. "There was a pile of freshly gnawed bones."

On the following day the newspapers adorned themselves with large, black type that would have alarmed any population even if the panicky stories it related did not. The gist of their reports was that six women had been attacked and eaten by ferocious wolves. The wolves then smugly howled their satisfaction, and all of this had taken place virtually under the noses of a complacent constabulary that was helpless to do anything at all to protect the citizens of London.

The Home Secretary summoned everyone concerned to what he called a strategy meeting. "Panic meeting would have been a better term for it," Lady Sara observed. But she went and took me along—not, she assured me, in order to learn anything, either about wolves or about the missing women, but to observe the convolutions of higher police thinking.

Professor Carnley was the principal witness. "First of all, that sound everyone found so alarming was not a wolf's howl," he announced firmly. "It was a human voice mimicking a wolf's howl. It was not badly done, but I've heard far better imitations. Second, the notion that a pack of wolves has taken up residence in the middle of London and is preying on unwary citizens is preposterous. Wolves avoid human habitations. My neighbour tells me a badger resides at the bottom of his garden. A wolf wouldn't do that. Further, a pack of wolves couldn't move about this city

unseen. If they were here, they wouldn't stay a moment longer than it took them to leave. Wolves need large territories to function in. They may cover a hundred miles or more in their incessant search for food. I point out that there has been no reliable report of anyone's seeing even one wolf.

"Finally, the assumption that women are falling prey to a wolf or wolves is equally preposterous. There is no documented evidence of a North American wolf ever killing a human. There is, of course, a long folk tradition of European wolves preying on humans. It has even left its mark on children's nursery stories—consider 'Little Red Riding Hood' and 'The Three Little Pigs.' But this is a peasant tradition belonging to rural, even wild, regions. The forests of the Pyrenees, for example, not the streets of Paris or Berlin."

"Do wolves always hunt in packs?" Lady Sara asked.

"They seem to prefer to, but they have been observed hunting alone with considerable success."

We listened to Mr. Elcock's recording. It had a thin, tinny sound and was far less chilling in the Home Secretary's office than the original had been on the bank of the Thames.

Chief Inspector Mewer challenged Professor Carnley's assertion about wolves' killing humans. He had done his own research. "An adult wolf can reach a weight of one hundred and seventy-five pounds, a length of five feet or more, and a height of more than three feet," he said. "All the books I investigated called wolves cunning, skilled, and savage predators. A woman taken unawares wouldn't stand much chance against one and no chance at all against a pack."

"A wolf that size would be an unusually large specimen—in fact, a rare specimen. It occurs so infrequently that a zoologist like myself could study wolves for a lifetime and never encounter one." The Professor added impatiently, "It hardly matters whether a nonexistent wolf is large or small. There are no wolf packs in London. As yet no one has seen—or heard—even one wolf in London."

"A lot of people think they have," Chief Inspector Mewer muttered.

The Home Secretary's office was crammed with every high police officer available. As they exchanged views, all of them talked freely and sometimes simultaneously. The result was not brilliant. They had already reinforced the East End police substantially. Now they decided to borrow police from cities as far away as Birmingham and Liverpool to further reinforce them.

The Home Secretary listened with growing impatience. Finally he turned to Lady Sara. She had already contributed Professor Carnley to the investigation as well as Mr. Elcock and his gramophone. The Home Secretary wanted more. "You must have formed some kind of theory about all this, Sara. What is it?"

"All of this argument is directed at the wrong question," she said. "To wolf or not to wolf has nothing to do with it. The question is—how could



anyone possibly profit from frightening a large area of London with wolf howls and by abducting six impoverished, perfectly ordinary East End housewives? I think I know, but I'm not ready to expound the answer. The climax won't come for another day or two, and until then, the picture will remain muddled. I will venture a prediction, though. Something sensational is going to happen tonight, and it won't help an iota to transfer more police reinforcements to the East End. I recommend that you move in a brigade of infantry—not to accomplish anything with the mystery of the wolf and the missing women but to reassure the populace.”

“Well!” the Home Secretary said indignantly. “Calling in the army—that would be—well! We can't use a brigade of infantry as police auxiliaries. If it were a matter of civil unrest or something like that, perhaps. But merely to police the streets . . .”

“After tonight there will be considerable civil unrest—in the East End and throughout the remainder of London,” Lady Sara said.

“What's going to happen?”

“That I don't know,” Lady Sara said. “Thus far, the perpetrators of this mystery, be it crime or prank or whatever, have shown considerable resource. No doubt they will continue to do so. I'll be waiting with interest to see what their next move will be.”

“So will we all,” the Home Secretary said dryly.

As we boarded Lady Sara's waiting carriage, I asked, “What do we do next?”

“Go home and take a nap,” she said. “We may be up all night.”

Lady Sara established her East End headquarters in the Old Bosun, a small pub in Cable Street—close to the docks but just north of the unsavoury streets favoured by sailors of all nationalities and those who preyed on them.

Lady Sara had marshaled her own small brigade. It consisted of myself; Charles Tupper and Rick Allward, her footmen, both capable detectives; and a full three score of the most reliable street people among those she employed from time to time: street sweepers, costermongers, scavengers, street performers—people from the immense wash of humanity striving to survive in London. Lady Sara had first given them routine chores to perform, then tried them with more complicated assignments. Those who showed genuine talent were rewarded with regular part-time employment and a welcome addition to their scant earnings.

She placed them where she thought their unusual powers of observation would be of greatest use. We made ourselves comfortable in the pub and made a foray from time to time to find out what was happening.

Nothing was happening. No one caught a hint of a wolf, either real or imitation. The night was as quiet as a night in London's East End ever was. Rowdy sailors raised their voices from time to time. Their songs echoed up to us from riverside pubs. The strident sounds of ships on the



river seemed surprisingly near. The incessant rumble of street traffic—hooves clattering; the iron-rimmed wheels of wagons and carts, headed for London's markets, grinding on cobblestones—hung in the background. Cable Street was a considerable thoroughfare in its own right and heavily traveled.

The night seemed peaceful, but there were noticeable differences between the London we saw and heard when we ventured outside the Old Bosun and the London of normal times. For one thing, there were no women about. Even in the sailors' dives, where women sometimes seemed to outnumber the sailors, there were none. London was still terrified. Especially its women were terrified.

For another, pedestrian street traffic was noticeably diminished, and the street vendors seemed to be taking the night off. Usually their stalls and barrows, marked by flaring naphtha lights that brightened long lengths of the major streets, were surrounded by crowds of genial customers. Now few of them could be seen.

We were returning from a foray and had stopped to talk with one of Lady Sara's agents when it happened. A drunken sailor, weaving about uncertainly, staggered a few steps into a narrow alley he was passing. There was a roaring growl followed by scream after scream. A large, dark animal had seized him.

Although there were few pedestrians about, help reached him quickly. Several passersby rushed to his aid—and were savagely bitten. Nothing succeeded in driving the animal away, and Lady Sara, who had produced a small revolver when the fracas started, kept circling the struggle and waiting for the convolutions of thrashing limbs and snapping teeth to leave her an opening for an unobstructed shot. Finally one came, and she shot the animal dead.

It was a wolf. At least, in the darkened alley it looked uncommonly like one, but we had no time for fine zoological distinctions. The wolf's victim had been savagely mauled; he needed medical attention. Further, sounds of other attacks—screams of victims, shouts of those trying to help, and savage growls—reached us from all directions.

We dashed along Cable Street to the next victim and rescued two more, Lady Sara shooting both animals, before enough police arrived to take over. The police truncheon proved an excellent weapon against a wolf's attack: one animal after another had its skull crushed.

Even before all the wolves were accounted for, Chief Inspector Mewer sent for Professor Carnley, and the professor quickly settled the wolf pack. "These are dogs," he said. "Mongrels, every one of them, though most have some German shepherd blood."

"Are they part wolf?" Chief Inspector Mewer demanded. He was not going to surrender his wolf pack easily.

"There's a theory," Professor Carnley said, "that all dogs are descended from wolves, but even if it's true, these particular dogs haven't had wolf



ancestors more recently than prehistoric times. I'll grant you they are large and unusually savage dogs. It wouldn't surprise me if they've been deliberately starved to make this performance more convincing. That is for autopsies to determine, and I recommend them. But autopsies won't make them anything but dogs."

The final toll was twenty-one—twenty-one savage dogs and a considerably larger number of injured people, since the dogs had turned on anyone who came to the rescue of their victims. One child, a boy of ten, had been bitten so severely that he lay near death in London Hospital. Hastily summoned doctors were still patching up the wounded and deciding which of them needed to be hospitalized when there floated over the East End a sound that seemed more terrifying each time I heard it: the howl of a wolf.

It was morning before we learned that another woman was missing.

Sally Dobson's husband worked at night doing street repairs. After her husband went to work, she had visited a sister who lived in the same building. The sister, an invalid, had a letter that needed posting. Since the pillarbox was only a few doors away, Sally volunteered to post it for her. She intended to go home as soon as she had done so, but she wasn't there when the husband returned from work and there was no sign of her having spent the night there.

The missing women now totaled seven.

The Home Secretary invited Lady Sara to attend another meeting, but she declined. Instead, she spent an intense two hours studying a map of London and filling several pages with notes. We heard the results of the meeting immediately after it concluded. Certain low-crime areas of London were to be completely denuded of police so a massive force could be thrown into the East End to settle the wolf question permanently. Among those areas were Belgravia, Mayfair, and St. John's Wood, as well as such remote suburbs as Hampstead and Highgate and closer communities like Camden Town, Islington, and Hoxton.

Lady Sara pursed her lips. "The East End will be so crowded with police that neither they nor the criminals will have room to turn around," she observed. "We now must appeal to a higher authority." She telephoned the Prime Minister's secretary, who was one of her numerous cousins, and asked him to arrange an appointment with that august person.

She returned from it in a far better mood. She said, "The Prime Minister differs from the Home Secretary in having a glimmer of intelligence. He can be reasoned with."

As a result, for the next twelve hours Lady Sara Varnley was the most powerful person in London. She immediately got her brigade of infantry with several reserve battalions in case they were needed. The brigadier called on her within the hour for orders. Before he left, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police arrived. He had received a highly confidential



memorandum directly from the Prime Minister but endorsed by the Home Secretary en route: until further notice, he would receive his orders from Lady Sara—and no one in Scotland Yard except the Commissioner himself was to know this.

Lady Sara and I had never worked harder than we did that afternoon. For her, short briefings of army officers alternated with interminable, highly confidential discussions with police officers she selected herself. While that was going on, I ranged over much of London, visiting and approving sites Lady Sara had selected from her map. Once I had done so, I took police and army officers to see their assigned positions, and I made certain they understood what they were to do.

The Prime Minister himself undertook to keep any mention of what was going on out of the newspapers. He never told Lady Sara how he managed this.

When evening came, the army began to move into the East End. Armed soldiers took up positions Lady Sara had selected. Groups of two or three were stationed on every street corner, and squads patrolled the area. At other times such a clumsy demonstration of force would have been met with indignation, but not on this evening. The citizens had had enough of wolves.

At police stations all about London, police were climbing onto lorries, wagons, even borrowed horse buses, for their trip to the East End, where they were to reinforce the police there. Those who saw them loading up failed to see them in secluded byways a short time later, unloading and, as darkness fell, quietly making their way back to their districts on foot. Once they arrived, they did not report to their stations or assume their usual activities of patrolling their beats. Instead, officers whom Lady Sara had briefed posted them at strategic places on roads leading into and out of their districts.

Night settled in—a quiet night, all over London. No wolf howled in the East End, and no wild dogs appeared. In the rest of London, police officers keeping carefully under cover tabulated traffic moving into certain districts. Belgravia, Mayfair, and St. John's Wood were home to many wealthy people. Carriage traffic was commonplace, but there seemed to be an unusual amount of such traffic even for those elegant addresses. Also, there were oddities: lorries, for example, their loads covered with canvas, whose nighttime presence in such neighbourhoods was rare indeed. The concealed officers dutifully tabulated them but made no effort to investigate. Finally the traffic diminished to normal. The police officers relaxed.

In the East End life was returning to normal. Vendors, reassured by the presence of the army, returned to their stands or brought their barrows. Some of them did a brisk business supplying soldiers with food and drink. In the remainder of London life also seemed monotonously normal.

I witnessed the first incident myself. It happened shortly before mid-


~~~~~

night, and I was with a group of police positioned on Sloane Street just south of Knightsbridge. A carriage came clomping along Sloane Street headed north—two coachmen on the box, two footmen at the rear, and, inside, an erect, cloaked, top-hatted figure whose silhouette strongly resembled that of a well-known earl.

As the carriage approached the Knightsbridge intersection, a wagon pulled across the street in front of it, and a uniformed police officer stepped out and signaled the carriage to halt. It did so. The top-hatted figure inside leaned out. "What's the trouble, officer?"

"There's an obstruction up ahead, sir. We'll have it cleared shortly."

"Very well."

"We'll have to keep the street clear, sir."

Police officers had seized each horse's harness; others positioned themselves on either side of the carriage. They began to turn the carriage aside into Basil Street.

"I say!" the top-hatted figure exclaimed. "This shouldn't be necessary!"

The footmen suddenly dropped to the ground and ran for it. The coachmen had a higher leap, but they followed at once. All four were quickly collared. A constable opened the door and invited the top-hatted figure to step out. He balked—and was evicted with force and handcuffed.

An officer flashed his lantern. "If it isn't Wondrous Willie Waller. I heard you were going straight. It only goes to show how unreliable rumours are. What do we have here? A whole carriage-load of sacks." He rapped on one of them. "Could that be plate from some aristocratic mansion? We'll quickly find out."

The captives were led away; police officers replaced the coachmen and drove the carriage out of sight. The wagon was moved aside, setting the stage for the next victim.

It was happening through all of those wealthy districts whose police had supposedly abandoned them for the night. By two A.M. a large number of housebreakers had been caught with the goods. In addition to Wondrous Willie, there were other underworld celebrities—among them Slick Eddie Wait, who always dressed like a graduate of Oxford and whose agility in scaling wastepipes was without equal; Roscoe Billingham, the sad-eyed scion of a prominent family who was called the Prince of the Jimmy by his colleagues because of his deft technique in opening windows (when I saw him being handcuffed, he looked even sadder-eyed); Gentleman James Uppington, who loved to enter luxurious residences in the wee hours and pretend he actually was a gentleman, treating himself to a glass of port and smoking one of his unwilling host's cigars while extracting plate, jewelry, and other expensive and easily marketable knickknacks; and Flypaper Nick, so-called because when he entered a house at night everything stuck to him.

It was a clean sweep of London's most notorious housebreakers. Lady Sara, who had set up her headquarters in the Home Secretary's office un-



der his doleful eye, calmly made a list of those caught as the police telephoned to report each new bag. Culprits tried to haul away their loot along the most unlikely routes leading out of the various districts, but Lady Sara had placed her men carefully. As the night waned, word somehow got back to those housebreakers still at work that something had gone wrong. They abandoned carriages, lorries with their loads of ladders, and sacks containing fortunes in stolen goods, and tried to escape on foot, but Lady Sara's net snared them anyway. Even when they left all the large items behind, their greed had made them stuff their pockets, and there was plenty of evidence on their persons.

Dawn was breaking when a group of high-ranking police officers joined us. Lady Sara made her final tabulations, gave the Home Secretary a nod of satisfaction, and prepared to depart.

"We want to know how you did it," the Home Secretary said.

"By asking the right question," Lady Sara said. "I told you what it was two days ago. What possible profit could come to anyone through those phony wolf howls and the abduction of those harmless, impoverished women? Increasing the police presence in the East End each night would inevitably leave other parts of London severely underpoliced. The only ones who could profit from that were London's housebreakers—but in order to cash in, they would have to have a spy in Scotland Yard who could give them advance notice as to what districts would be underpoliced on a given night. I put the spy in check by pretending to transfer police to the East End but secretly bringing them back and placing them strategically. As a result, we have thinned the ranks of London's burglars for some time to come.

"Unfortunately, none of them will talk, so we'll never know who thought up this caper. They aren't going to tell you who their Scotland Yard spy is, either. No doubt all of this was brought about by a chance encounter between one thief with imagination and another who somehow had learned to imitate a wolf. They had the intelligence to foresee that a true reign of terror in the East End would force the police to take drastic action and move in reinforcements from other parts of London. From that point, the housebreakers did a truly admirable amount of work. They had to 'spot the lay' on houses all over London so they would have a list of alternatives when the most desirable ones had to be scratched because of unforeseen circumstances—the owner hosting a party that ran late, servants up late, people alert in nearby houses, or whatever. Successful burglars are excessively cautious people."

"How did you guess they'd turn wild dogs loose?" Chief Inspector Mewer demanded.

"I didn't. I guessed they must have some drastic move in reserve because they would know that any expert in wolves would be able to tell the police that theirs was a fake. Once that information got around, the reign of terror would be over and their ingenious plan would start to un-



ravel. Their spy in Scotland Yard was able to pass the word to them the moment I brought in Professor Carnley, and they played their trump card, the wild dogs, before the Professor's verdict could be made generally known."

"The people wouldn't have believed us anyway," Chief Inspector Mewer observed. "The women were still missing, and their number was still increasing."

"It won't increase further. There would be no point in it."

"But those who were missing are still missing," Chief Inspector Mewer persisted. "You gave us the housebreakers, I'll grant you that, and it's a very fine achievement, but where *are* the missing women? How will you go about finding them?"

"I won't," Lady Sara said. "I expect them to be released shortly, since their disappearance is no longer of use to those who abducted them."

Six of them returned home two days later. They had an odd story to tell. They had been seized, quickly bound and gagged and wrapped in a rug, loaded into some kind of wagon, and given what seemed an interminable—and extremely uncomfortable—ride. Somewhere outside of London they were unbound and assured that nothing bad was going to happen to them. They first stayed in a farmhouse, closely watched. When their total had increased to four, they were given an all-night ride in a carriage and then held prisoner in another farmhouse. Eventually there were seven of them.

The day after the housebreaking fiasco, they were each given five pounds "for any inconvenience suffered" plus money for a railway ticket and cabfare home after they reached London. After another long carriage ride—unbound, this time—they were let out at a rural railway halt. None of the six could recall its name. There was no building; probably the name had been painted on a sign somewhere, but they never saw it. They were shown how to stop the London train and left there. There were still seven of them.

The six who arrived home had no idea what had happened to the missing woman. She had been with them when they boarded the train and for some time afterward; suddenly she wasn't. They also remembered very little about the train ride. The strain of being held captive had exhausted them, and they mostly slept. Like typical East End women, when they reached Liverpool Station, all six of them chose to walk home rather than waste a shilling on a cab.

The seventh woman, Sadie Buddle, returned two days later. Lady Sara and I accompanied Chief Inspector Mewer when he went to interview her. Her story was a simple one. On the way back to London with the others, she suddenly noticed that the train had arrived in Bishop's Stortford. A sister she hadn't seen in donkey's years lived there, and she decided to visit her. She hadn't time to wake the others and tell them. It took a mad dash to get off the train before it started again. She found her



sister's house after a confused hour of seeking directions and had her visit. That taken care of, she resumed her journey home. No, she hadn't worried about her family. Her children were grown. Her husband had been on a binge, or several binges, and he hadn't missed her.

We emerged from the ramshackle building where she lived and looked about us. Dusk had settled in. The East End had recovered its jaunty atmosphere. It was Saturday night, the streets were crowded, and vendors with naphtha flares lighting their barrows and stalls were doing a brisk business.

"We'll hope this writes *finis* to the wolf business," the Chief Inspector said. Then he froze. All of us froze. From somewhere toward the river came the unmistakable, lonely moan of a wolf. Anyone in London would now recognize that cry wherever it was heard.

The Chief Inspector started at a run, with us following. He picked up reinforcements along the way, as every constable we met recognized him and spontaneously joined our chase. We pounded along Wapping High Street past the Town of Ramsgate, a small riverside pub. Up ahead a crowd had gathered. The howl continued, and we had no difficulty at all in tracing it directly to where the crowd was standing.

The howl came from an upstairs window of the Wapping Marine Police Station, and in the street below, a group of police officers, university students, and citizens from nearby houses were listening with interest.

The howler was Professor Carnley, who had brought a group of students to spend the day studying zoology along the Thames. While he and his students were having dinner at a nearby pub, some police officers overheard his discussion of wolf howls and challenged him to a demonstration. His imitation of a wolf was at least as chilling as the one we had heard several nights previously.

The Chief Inspector ordered him to turn off the wolf and come down to join us. When he emerged from the station, the Chief Inspector told him, "We've had enough wolf howls."

"Oh," the professor said as though that hadn't occurred to him, and probably it hadn't. "To be sure. I was merely demonstrating—"

"No more demonstrations," the Chief Inspector said severely.

"I see. The tale of the wolf is told."

"The tale of the wolf is told," Lady Sara agreed. "But the tale of the housebreakers has some years to run in His Majesty's prisons."

FICTION

# THE NO-BRAINER

S. L. Franklin



*Illustration by M. Bilokur*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 4/02*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



---

SEPTEMBER 1975

*Ginny Begins*

"Mrs. Busse," I said, "my name is Angela Todd, and I represent the Illinois Commission of Reemployment Opportunity."

I held up a laminated photo identification card for her to read through the screen. She appeared to be a rather nondescript person in her mid-thirties—thirty-four I knew from the file I carried. She wore her light brown hair medium length, with heavy bangs that hung well down her forehead and accentuated, in an unfortunate way, the dark-framed glasses beneath them. She had a hard, small mouth.

"Yeah. What do you want?" she said. She looked out at me with an expression half of displeasure and half of what in French is called *ennui*. I was at that time over seven months pregnant with Jeanie, our first child, which might have accounted for some of her hostility—certain types of people seem irrationally put off by pregnant women. I thought, however, that there might be another reason. If there weren't, in fact, then I was wasting my time.

I said, "Your name has come to us from the Labor Department's Office of Workmen's Compensation—"

"Oh. So they're after me. Look, Miss—"

"Mrs., please," I said.

"Whatever. I can't work at Filtration any more. I fell, I hit my head, I couldn't walk straight for two months. And I still can't stand or sit upright very long. I have to lie down most of the time."

"I—that's why I'm here, Mrs. Busse. The Illinois Commission of Reemployment Opportunity was recently created to help disabled and semi-disabled persons like yourself find ways and means to become gainfully reemployed at work designed to accommodate their disabilities. May I come in for a minute?"

She looked up and down the street before replying, "Yeah. Sure. You look like you need to sit as much as I do."

She opened the screen door, and I followed her into the living room of the apartment. It was small but surprisingly tidy and extremely well furnished. The ghost of an odor that reminded me unpleasantly of my college dormitory days hung in the air. "Try that chair," she said. "I've got to stretch out."

I lowered myself onto the front edge of an armchair covered in green plush, feeling ungainly and at a disadvantage. She propped herself at one end of the matching sofa and put her legs up with an easy motion. She was wearing a sleeveless knit top and denim shorts, and she looked in remarkably good health for a disabled person.

I opened my file and said, "First I need to verify certain information. Your name is Vera Busse, this is 3401 North Oberon, Apartment 1-C, your date of birth is June 12, 1941, you are . . . married?" I looked up at her.

"I've been too lazy to get a divorce, and now I'm too beat down."

"I see. No children?"

"No way."

"You worked at Filtration Systems as a product inspector from March of 1973 until April 6, 1975—that's over five months ago. Is all that correct?"

"Yeah."

"What is your level of education?"

"High school. Leyden Township."

"Did you graduate?"

"Yeah."

"Any special training?"

She laughed unexpectedly and said, "None you'd care to know about, honey."

"Do you type, take dictation, or sew—on a machine?"

"No, no, and no." She was staring at the ceiling with a sarcastic smile on her face.

"I see," I said. I looked around the room and into the kitchen and bedroom as far as my sightlines would penetrate. I said, "Pardon me, Mrs. Busse, but could I use your bathroom for a moment?"

"Yeah. Go ahead. When you're pregnant, you gotta pee."

I pushed myself up and carried my purse with me toward the back of the apartment, taking in as much as I could without seeming to be overly curious. In the bathroom I examined the cabinets and linen closet briefly and redid my lipstick before flushing the toilet and turning on the tap. Then I opened the door silently and peeked out toward the living room. Vera Busse was standing by the chair I had vacated, going through the file I had left behind. "Mrs. Busse," I said. "Please. That information is confidential."

She whirled around to face me at the sound of my voice, and for a

moment I was afraid. She was larger than I was, and with my protruding tummy I was at a great disadvantage. At the sight of me, however, her hard, angry expression melted into a mocking smile. "Caught in the act, eh," she said. "Just wanted to see if you were who you said, honey. Strange people come around."

"I'm not one of them," I responded. "I'd like to finish this and leave as soon as possible, if you don't mind."

"Leave anytime you want."

I asked several more questions, told her to watch the mail for our evaluation of her situation, and left. I walked to the end of the block and around the corner to where R. J. was waiting for me, my first official venture as a private detective's assistant having been distinctly not a success. I thought so at the time, and I think so now.

### *R. J. Continues*

The man was bald on top, with a graying beard underneath, and he peered through the two open doors—the one from the hall to the waiting room and the one from the waiting room into my office—with a look of pronounced dubiety, so pronounced that, even with my poor vision, I spotted it from behind my desk.

I said, "Believe me, I don't like it any better than you do." Then I stood up.

"Are you . . . R. J. Carr?" he said, staying where he was. He was about six feet tall and oval-shaped in his gray houndstooth suit.

"Yeah. C'mon in," I replied.

"You're early, but so am I." He walked across the waiting room slowly, looking left and right at the decrepit sofa and sagging chairs. After he was in the inner office, seated across the desk from me, I said, "How private are we? The cross-ventilation is nice, but I'll close the door if you want."

"I don't know," he said. "I just don't know." He stared around again at my tired old furniture and the scarred linoleum and the water-warped door to the kitchenette and then at me—large and ugly in my shirtsleeves and tie.

"Nothing here to inspire confidence, eh?" I said. "Want to see my diploma?"

"I—no. Chief Schmidt said you were the best."

I shrugged. "I'm okay at detective work. Interior decorating's not my line."

He went on frowning but said, "Ahh . . . all right. Maybe if we could close the door?" I got up to close it and then sat again behind the desk.

"What do you charge for surveillance, Mr. Carr?" he asked abruptly.

"It depends."

"On what?"

"On what I surveil. Start at the beginning."

He looked past me toward the open window and the rear of the old flat-roofed two-flat across the alley. It was a beautiful September afternoon out there someplace, although I got the impression that he wasn't noticing. He said, "This is just an annoyance to me, you know, and an expense, but it's gotten to the point where I feel justified in

spending a little more to get it stopped. Like I told you last night, I'm Joe Dubek. My family—my brother and I really, my parents are retired—we own a business out in Broadview called Filtration Systems. It's not an original name, but that's what we make.

"We're small. We've never had more than a hundred employees, and the more we automate, the more that goes down. A couple of years back we took on a gal as an inspector who we never should have hired, but we did it as a favor for . . ." He came to a halt. "You can skip that part, actually; it's a sore spot, and it doesn't matter. Anyway, this gal was a chronic problem: okay at the job, which doesn't require much, but absent a lot, late, didn't get along, that kind of thing. Then around Easter this year she tripped and fell and landed funny—that part's legit—and so we get a workman's comp claim. That's okay, too. We pay the insurance, we get a claim from time to time. It's part of the business. We don't like it, but it happens.

"Only the fact is, this gal is milking it. She was out two months and about ready to come back when suddenly she goes to a fresh doctor who practically rewrites the original report and says she's disabled—chronic dizziness, spasms, I don't know what all.

"So our insurance company's on the hook and our premiums are getting jacked."

"Has the insurance company investigated?" I asked.

"They sent a man out. He said to me privately—so it doesn't count—

that he thought it was fraud. Not provable, though, as long as this gal keeps getting her doctor to claim for her. He also told me that they usually go after this type of phony in about eighteen months." He paused, then looked at me. "Unless—"

"Yeah. Surveillance. Look, Mr. Dubek, I'm good at some things, but I only do surveillance as part of a bigger job. I'm too easy to spot, I work alone, my eyesight is poor at night and none too good in broad daylight. If just watching this woman at her home is what you're pitching, I'm not catching."

"Two thousand dollars," he said. "I'm pitching two thousand dollars at you."

"You could get Norton Security to do a decent job on her for two thousand. I'd have to farm it out, a lot of it, and then it would be more like six fifty to me. And there'd be expenses on top of it."

"Chief Schmidt says you're the guy to get. If we prove fraud, we'll get rebated on our claims and sue the doctor for damages. I want to nail this gal. I'll go twenty-five hundred and five hundred expenses."

I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes. I'd had a reasonably good year up to that point, but for me a good year was a relative thing, plus the fact that Ginny was going to stop bringing in her one forty a week pretty shortly, and then, if things kept going right, in a few more weeks we'd have a three thousand dollar medical expense and a new baby to feed, clothe, and shelter.

I said, "Three thousand dollars—

in advance. No refunds, no guarantees. I'll get something for you. It might not be enough for right now, but it'll help when the insurance company gets serious. Or, I might get lucky—who knows? But I'll have to do more than surveillance."

He fixed his eye on the water-warped door. "No refunds, no guarantees. Chief Schmidt didn't tell me that."

"I can't manufacture results, Mr. Dubek. I'll give you three thousand dollars' worth of effort. The expenses won't be much. Five hundred's way too high a figure."

He licked his lips and said, "All right. But how about a thousand now, the rest in installments. How would that be?"

I stood up. "It's been nice talking, Mr. Dubek," I said. "Send me a postcard sometime."

"And?" said Ginny as we were driving home that night.

"He wrote a check for thirty-two hundred. He'll probably stop payment tomorrow. The office failed to impress, but I did impress—he thinks I'm a bandit."

"You were, perhaps, a trifle high-handed. There are sides to you I'm still learning about."

"Well, the guy was taking two steps forward and one step back, right along. If I accepted the thousand and hired two freelancers to help and then he had second thoughts, I'd be out the whole amount. You can't get anyone for under five hundred any more."

"Yes. I see that," she said. I looked across at her as she moved uncomfortably on the seat beside me. She

had on a loose-fitting white blouse, with floral embroidery stitched here and there, over blue maternity slacks. Her face, as always, was beautiful. "What I don't see . . . or rather, I confess that I'm bothered somewhat by the fact that he seems to have wanted you at any price for a blatantly routine task."

"A real no-brainer, yeah. But I guess the police chief out in the burb where Dubek lives told him to get Carr or nobody—although I'm not sure why, since the two of us didn't get along on that Butler business last year."

"Your work on 'that Butler business' saved the man his position as I recall. Wasn't his name Schmidt? Perhaps he wants to return the favor."

"By recommending me for a surveillance job? It probably means he hates my guts."

When we got home to the three-flat, I threw dinner together and let Ginny rest with her feet up. She was still putting in eight hours doing office work for my uncle, and at seven months it had become something of a strain. After we ate, I called up the two cheap gumshoes I counted on in those days to help me out for things like surveillance and ran into a snare. Both were working other jobs.

"Does that mean you can't do it?" Ginny asked as we washed the dishes.

"I don't know," I replied. "I'm not too big a believer in surveillance as a technique, but in this particular case, it's not only what the client wants, it's the obvious, basic approach: watch this woman's apart-

ment for signs of normal physical activity on her part—going out for long stretches of time, walking or even driving for lengthy periods, having friends over for long evenings. In this way, if we're lucky, we can build up a file of evidence that contradicts her claim.

"Of course, I plan to do more than that—get someone, not myself, inside her apartment to check out her behavior, break in while she's gone and nose around a little, follow her and see where she goes when she goes out, sound out her neighbors for dirt, investigate her doctor a little. There are lots of things to try."

"I see," said Ginny. She turned to face me. "Could I—that is, having voiced a reservation earlier, could I now perhaps offer a suggestion?"

"Such as?"

"Let's go sit. These pans can soak."

We poured glasses of iced tea and adjourned to the living room. "What do you have in mind?" I said when we were seated on the sofa.

"Well—if I understand you correctly, the reason you asked for so large a fee was to cover the expense of a long, continuous watch of this woman."

"Couple of weeks minimum, yeah. I'm really planning on rebating some of the money if things go badly. No use telling Dubek that, though. He'd want it in advance, with interest."

"Well, why can't you eliminate certain hours? I would surmise that this woman—what's her name?"

"Vera Busse."

"That Vera Busse is quite careful



to appear to be an invalid during the day, at least. And also that the hours from two A.M. onward don't need surveillance either. If she's doing things at night—even all night, like a secret job—she would begin by midnight or one, don't you think?"

I thought for a moment, then said, "Maybe. The thing to do, actually, is to test it out—your theory. Watch a couple of days from seven A.M. to whenever, then drop back to the evening if the day shift showed nothing."

"Yes, that's good. But—well, what if—that is, couldn't you, or the person not yourself whom you want to confront Vera Busse in her apartment—couldn't that person somehow define Vera Busse's day for her, through questions?"

"How many laws are you prepared to break?" I asked after a moment.

"Me personally? I—" She pushed a thick wave of black hair away from her face, then looked at me. "It would be fun, I admit. I've been a bureaucrat, in a way, when I was counseling at U. of C. I think I could . . ." She stopped and stared, then sipped at her tea. "I could be a field worker from some governmental agency—we could decide on which one later—with a list of questions that must be answered. I think I could do it."

"Yeah. Maybe so. But you'd probably also have to take a day off from work."

"Oh. You're right—and lose a day's wages. That does put the problem in a different light." She eyed me with comical skepticism.

"What's the pay scale for this new job?"

"I don't know—the usual, I guess. You get to sleep with the boss."

"Ha!" she said. "I thought as much. And when I tried it before, look where it got me." She took my hand and laid it on her stomach. Our child was doing the rhumba.

That had been on a Thursday. The next day I'd made a run past Vera Busse's apartment, which lay out in the suburbs about four miles west of our three-flat. Her building was modern and cheap: two stories of flat-roofed brick about a hundred and fifty feet long, with a row of slant-in, curbside tenant parking spaces in front and outside entrances to each of the one bedroom apartments on both floors. The back of the building resembled the front but with even cheaper brick and no picture windows. I went so far as to knock on the rear door of an apartment with no car parked in front just to spy out the difficulty of illegal entry. The balance of the neighborhood was mostly newer-style bungalows dating from the fifties, but diagonally across the intersection from the apartment stood a dry cleaning operation with a parking lot in front. My second professional act had been to stop in and negotiate with the owner about using his lot as an observation point, after which I'd driven down to Filtration Systems to see Dubek's records on Vera Busse.

The real work on the case started the following Monday morning. Ginny, bearing false identification and claiming to represent a nonex-

istent but plausibly titled state agency, forced an interview with the woman to question her about her disability while I waited in the car and hoped for the best.

Ginny's plan of action had sounded good to me right up until the moment she'd walked around the corner and out of my sight. That's when I'd started to worry. The truth was that while she'd helped out on three or four of my cases in the fifteen months we'd been married her previous contributions had been entirely in the form of analysis and commentary. This was her first venture "in the field," and not only was she seven months pregnant, she was walking head-on into the least predictable situation in detective work: knocking on doors. Because you just never knew what waited for you behind any door, or locked inside the head of any person under investigation.

I remember calling myself a dummy out loud and deciding on the spot that Ginny had twenty minutes maximum to get in and out before I was going in after her.

After seventeen long minutes, though, she came around the corner looking pale and serious and eased herself into the car. "Let's not talk here," she remarked, so I started the engine and pulled away from the curb.

"Are you all right?" I asked after a moment.

"Yes. But I . . . I want to ask you a question—before I begin. Two questions. The first is, how can you do this for a living?"

"I don't know. It's something I wonder about every day."

"Seriously. Aren't you ever . . . afraid? At all?"

I put my hand on hers. "I was feeling afraid for *you*, to tell the truth, the whole time you were gone, but for myself—" I shook my head. "Hardly ever. Most of the time I'm just bored. You've got to understand that, with my looks, I'm usually the one who inspires the fear. She scared you, eh?"

"Yes. As we planned, I caught her in the act of looking at the file. But rather than being intimidated, she . . . stared violence at me for a second. It was hard to go on after that."

"But you did."

"Yes. My other question is this: did the records you saw at Filtration Systems indicate—I don't know precisely how to put it—wealth? a second source of income?"

"Nope," I said. "She was making three sixty-seven an hour. She's getting something like sixty percent of that through workmen's compensation." I thought back, visualizing the employment application form. "Previous employer was the Burger Castle on Irving Park Road."

"R. J., Vera Busse has at least fifteen thousand dollars' worth of furnishings in that little apartment—maybe twenty thousand dollars' worth."

"What else?" I asked after a pause, glancing away from traffic to look at Ginny's face. She was staring ahead in concentration.

"I—she's a very hardened woman, R. J. She'd been smoking marijuana sometime earlier in the day—meaning early indeed—or else she does it so frequently that there's a permanent tang of it in the

apartment. She's about five feet nine, neither fat nor thin, neither pretty nor ugly. She—and this I think is telling—she moved very gracefully. She hinted through a wisecrack that at one time she'd worked as a prostitute, although the comment might merely have been shock treatment for the pregnant bureaucrat."

"What else?" I said again.

"Brown hair. Wears heavy, dark-framed glasses. In response to my questions, she told me that she's separated from a husband she hasn't seen in seven or eight years and receives no financial support from him. In the afternoon she can usually last about forty-five minutes without feeling like she has to lie down. In the morning and evening, it's more like twenty minutes—or so she says. She sees the neurologist once a week. Her next appointment is at three thirty tomorrow. She does her own grocery shopping in quick afternoon trips. Carrying things doesn't bother her particularly. She claims loneliness and boredom—no family or close friends in spite of having lived in the area her entire life.

"My observation: her house is too clean and neat for her to be an invalid. The bed was made, and it had those oversized pillows with the elaborate cases on it. An invalid wouldn't bother with those, probably wouldn't bother making the bed. Also—she has a taste for expensive cosmetics, even though she had on none this morning. Oh—and you might see her without the glasses. I noticed contact lens equipment by the sink in the bath-

room. Also a Browning .32 automatic and some shells in a sanitary napkin box in the linen closet. That was an accidental find, I admit. I moved the box to look behind, and it felt heavy."

"Wow!" I responded. "A pretty tough gal all right, as Joe Dubek says. The gun might simply go back to the split with her husband, though. Or she might own it for no reason. The woman I married owned two pistols as I recall."

"Target pistols—for the purpose of sport. The detective I married owned no pistols, so they finally have a practical use. You haven't commented on what I told you about the furnishings."

"That's because I don't have a comment. Maybe she had a sugar daddy at one time."

"Perhaps she still does. Everything looked almost new, R. J.—nothing over a year or two old. Why is she working at Burger Castle and Filtration Systems?"

"She isn't," I said. "And it's interesting, in a way, that the one thing she hasn't done is sue the company for damages."

We had an early lunch at home before I headed back out to Vera Busse's place for my first stint of surveillance. I pulled into the parking lot of the dry cleaner's at about five to twelve and spent the next four hours doing virtually nothing. About half the time I kept watch from inside, on a chair set out for customers who had to wait, and the other half of the time I watched from the car.

A few minutes before four o'clock, Vera Busse, wearing no glasses,

emerged from her apartment dressed in a pale pink blouse and red capri pants and got into a navy blue 1974 Mercury with a vinyl fawn-colored top. I followed her over to Cumberland, then north to a strip mall, where she went into a beauty parlor. Forty minutes later she walked out with her hair drastically trimmed and styled, after which she drove home and I followed her back. Except for explaining myself to two different police patrols, nothing else of note happened that day. I gave up at one thirty A.M.

The next morning I arrived at the dry cleaner's at ten and observed a total absence of activity until just after three in the afternoon. Then Vera Busse emerged again and drove off—this time, presumably, to see her neurologist. I drove off, too, but to a gas station a couple of blocks away, where I changed clothes in the men's room and came out looking like a utility company serviceman complete with a belt of tools.

After parking along the side street, I walked up the deserted alley and approached the back door to Vera Busse's apartment. I took a couple of tools out of the belt, knocked on the door, then tried them on the lock. After a second round of knocking, I pushed the door open and stood there explaining to no one at all that I was from the gas company about the funny smell. Then I invited myself into the kitchen.

I pulled on a pair of lightweight white cotton gloves and roamed in-

to the other two rooms looking for a desk. The furniture was new and expensive, just as Ginny had described it, but it appeared that Vera Busse was not the type of person who wasted space on desks or files, so I hunted first in the top drawers of the dresser in the bedroom, then in the bottom drawers. They were all filled with clothes. In the drawer of the bedside table I found a plastic bag full of marijuana and the things that go with it, plus two plastic druggist's containers with pills inside but no prescription labels attached. Those things might have been interesting to a policeman, but they weren't to me.

The closet held two wardrobes, one of working and casual clothes, one of expensive suits and dresses, most with a conservative cut. Vera Busse, I decided, had far too many clothes. A suitcase in the closet held what I was really looking for—bills, bank statements, records. I went through them at random, noting that she had two local and three national charge cards, that she had charged as much as two thousand dollars in one month and paid it the next, that her checking account was fueled mainly from an outside source, that she was drawing from it large amounts of cash. No cancelled checks were made out to her current physician, and she had no receipts from him paid on account. She also had no records indicating health insurance claims; Dubek had told me she had no health insurance. Her copies of the workmen's compensation correspondence and related materials were held together by a fat rubber band,

and after a quick look through them I decided to try elsewhere.

Ginny had found a pistol in the linen closet, so I looked there next, without any luck. I wiped down the pistol for no reason, just to get Ginny's prints off it if she'd left them, and took down its serial number. A glance at my watch told me I had about seven more safe minutes to search—not nearly enough. I went into the kitchen and looked in drawers and cabinets. When I had three minutes left, I decided to try one shot at finding her hiding place—she had to have one; everything indicated it. I went to the central point in the apartment and surveyed the rooms around me. I noticed that I'd left one of the dresser drawers slightly open, so I tried the dresser. Wedged above the top right drawer in the dresser's framework was a half inch thick wad of fifty dollar bills and an envelope. In the envelope was a savings account passbook in the name of Valerie Burkett and a safety deposit box key, both from the Alliance Bank and Trust on Grand Avenue. The passbook showed a balance of thirty-eight thousand dollars. On the outside of the envelope was written a seven digit number, which I copied along with the number on the passbook and the number on the key; then I put everything back the way it had been, surveyed each room briefly to make sure it looked the way I'd found it, and went out the back, making service man small talk as I left.

When I checked my watch, it was four eighteen. I'd run way over on time, and I wasn't feeling good at

all, either about what I'd found in the apartment or what I hadn't found. I drove back to the gas station and changed clothes; then I called Ginny at McPherson's Home Appliances.

"Mrs. Carr speaking," she said in her clear, low voice.

"Ginny, it's me. How are you feeling?"

"I—all right, I suppose. I'm hungry if you want to know the absolute truth. This child of yours has an insatiable appetite, and it isn't even born yet."

"Well, the reason I called is, we need to talk about what's happening here, only I've got to get back and watch. Could you ask Carl to lend you his car for the evening and drive out to see me? Get some dinner first."

"I'll ask. He's right here." After a thirty second pause, I heard her say, "R. J.? It's all right. Linda can pick him up."

"Then you'll come?"

"Yes. It's not good—is it?"

"I don't know. We need to talk."

We said goodbye, and I drove back to the dry cleaner's. Vera Busse was getting out of her car as I pulled into the parking lot.

"I want to get out of this job," I said. We were sitting in near-twilight in our car, eating a large picnic lunch that Ginny had packed and brought along. She looked rosy-cheeked and a touch plump, and she was mugging at me slightly as she struggled to get her mouth open wide enough to bite into a homemade submarine sandwich. Life suddenly felt normal to me



again after my unsettling discoveries of the afternoon.

"Well, go on," she said after a couple of mouthfuls.

"Either we've stumbled onto something way beyond the range of this investigation, or Joe Dubek is suckering me. Whichever way it is, I don't like it." I explained about what I'd found and not found.

"I told you those expensive furnishings meant something," she said.

"Yeah. I'm not sure I see a sugar daddy. What I do see is drug dealing or blackmail or money laundering—something connected to big-time criminal activity anyway. Nothing I want us to get even remotely close to."

"I see something else," Ginny said. "And it's not good either. If Joe Dubek is using you as a cat's-paw somehow, then he has his own set of clandestine motives."

"Clients always have clandestine motives. At this point, though, I don't want to even guess about Dubek's." But a new idea came to me in that moment that made me say, "Although . . . when I went to the plant last week, it was interesting to me that he lied to his brother about who I was."

"R. J.! You didn't tell me that."

"I just more or less assumed that they didn't agree on how to handle Vera Busse."

"Obviously," she remarked, raising her eyebrows. "But the assumption suggests a rather more sinister element—don't you feel?—now that we know what we know. What are we going to do about it?"

"We are not going to do anything

about it. You are finishing your dinner and going home to bed. I am staying here to complete a second full day of surveillance per contract. Tomorrow I'm going to see the local cops—who won't like my story, especially the breaking and entering part—and then, provided I'm still free to walk around, I'm going to go play dumb with my client, hand him a refund check for twenty-six hundred dollars, and refer him elsewhere."

"Good," said Ginny. "Except that I plan to stay until at least seven thirty. I don't need to go to bed at sundown."

So we sat and talked in the dwindling twilight, paying just enough attention to the apartment to catch any comings and goings. After a time Ginny began fooling with the binoculars, looking at me the wrong way around, looking up at the first visible star in the darkening sky, looking over at the apartment. Suddenly she said, "R. J.—is that Vera Busse?"

She handed me the binoculars. A woman carrying a purse and an overnight bag had come out of the apartment dressed in a dark businesswoman's suit with a white frilly blouse beneath and high-heeled shoes. Her short-trimmed hair was swept back, and she wasn't wearing glasses. I watched her stow the bag in the trunk of the Mercury and get in behind the wheel.

"That's her," I said. "I recognize the new hairstyle. What do I do? Follow her?"

"Of course you follow her. Let's go."

"You're coming?"

"Yes. It's a family excursion."

There wasn't time to argue, so when the Mercury was a block and a half south I pulled out to follow. It led in a zigzag fashion through parts of two suburbs until we came out on North Avenue and headed west. A short distance beyond the Mannheim underpass, it turned left into the sprawling parking lot of an enormous banquet hall. The lot was almost full, but Vera Busse slid into the one empty space at the near end just as I turned across the eastbound traffic to follow her. I drove on past, deeper into the lot, not knowing what else to do, until six double rows up, Ginny spotted an open space and we took it.

We hadn't talked much in our twenty minutes of pursuit, but now I said, "I'm going to take a quick look. You stay here and be ready to roll."

I got out of the car, leaving the keys in the ignition, and, bending low, worked my way back through the lot, off by the far edge near the road. In a later era, of course, the lot would have been illuminated to the brightness of midday, but in 1975 that wasn't the case. The night was dark, there was no moon, and the only thing I was sure of when I got as close as seemed reasonable was that she was still in the car.

My eyes, as I've mentioned, weren't good for night work, but after a long sixty seconds of watching I observed movement behind the wheel of the Mercury. Vera Busse appeared to be waiting, so I waited, too, hoping Ginny wouldn't worry. Behind me the whine of cars and

trucks passing by on North Avenue rose to an occasional high pitch and was never quiet.

At eight twenty-one Vera Busse got out of her car and walked quickly to the opposite side of the lot and up toward the hall. I trailed along from car to car near the street. When she was two double rows up, she suddenly opened the front passenger door of a car along the far lane and slipped inside.

So it was an assignation of some kind, I thought—just the sort of thing I'd decided I didn't want any part of. I worked my way considerably closer—straight across from where the woman sat, about six vehicles over—and crouched down to observe her. This time she was near one of the parking lot's few lights, so I could see her fairly well.

The marquee on the banquet hall read: WELCOME, LOCAL 143. At eight twenty-five, two men came out of the wide doors beneath the sign and began walking in Vera Busse's direction along the narrow traffic lane. As they drew closer, I could see that one was dark-haired with a mustache, the other rotund and balding. When they reached the car parked in front of the one where Vera Busse sat, she opened the door and stepped out.

The man with the mustache turned to his companion and said, "Hey! What's she doing here?"

That's when Vera Busse shot him twice, once in the chest, once in the head, and he toppled over backwards like a felled tree. The fat man watched him fall, then turned to Vera Busse and said, "Good. Very good. Now get out of here."

That was when I recognized him. And that was when Vera Busse shot him, too, squarely in the forehead from five feet away. Then she turned with the pistol in her hand and strode quickly back toward her own car.

I stayed right where I was.

*Ginny Continues*

With the binoculars I could see the entire tableau quite well: R. J. crouching down, Vera Busse sitting a few cars over with an impassive expression on her face. Madeup, newly coiffed, and without the glasses, she looked attractively hard, like an aggressive businesswoman.

The two men came into my view at the last minute, just as Vera Busse opened the car door and got out. When she raised the pistol and shot the first man, I could scarcely believe what I was seeing, and I couldn't seem to breathe for a second. When she shot the unresisting second man, I said out loud, "No! No!"

I felt sick.

I swung the binoculars over to view R. J., praying he wouldn't be foolhardy, and saw him there with his palm pressed to his forehead, still crouching down. I slid under the wheel, and when I saw in the rear view mirror that Vera Busse's car was beginning to move, I turned the key, backed out, and pulled down to the outside lane near the road. R. J. was standing by the time I drew up, peering through the dark at Vera Busse's taillights. I said loudly, not yelling, "R. J.—hadn't we better follow?"

He walked rapidly to the passenger side of the car and got in. I accelerated to the exit.

"You saw it?" he said after a moment.

"Yes." I was crying, but he didn't comment.

"They're both dead."

We pulled out onto North Avenue heading east and following the distinctive taillights on the Mercury a quarter of a mile ahead.

"She's a hit man—hit woman. Whatever. The low-scale jobs are just cover."

"What about the overnight bag?"

"That's why we're following, isn't it? I don't think she's going back. It doesn't quite fit, but—"

The Mercury headed up the exit ramp at Mannheim Road and turned south. We did the same.

"This is idiocy," said R. J.

"That woman just murdered two unarmed people," I said.

"Yeah. Let's just be darned sure she doesn't make it another two and a half."

"I was going to bring a pistol," I said stupidly. "You sounded so gloomy on the phone. But I didn't—I thought it was a picnic."

We followed Vera Busse south on Mannheim for several miles. I drove numbly, praying and fighting back the horrific images in my mind of the two murders. R. J. sat beside me saying very little. Once only he spoke: "Dubek's in it, but I can't see how. The second man was his brother Chuck—the one he lied to on Friday. The brother must have fingered the first guy, and someone else set up the brother. Why? Unless I was actually hired with all

this in mind, just to make sure that Vera Busse gets arrested, tried, and convicted."

"Wouldn't that make Joe Dubek's involvement rather too obvious?" I asked.

"Who knows? And who was the other victim?"

"Local 143?" I said, thinking aloud. "Is Filtration Systems unionized?"

The Mercury finally turned west on a major thoroughfare, and we followed well behind it through a lengthy stretch of forest preserve and into another suburban area, a wealthy one, with large homes on large lots set back from the road. I had narrowed the gap between the vehicles to within a hundred feet when Vera Busse signaled a right turn into a wooded residential development, and R. J. said quickly, "Drive on past. We're too close."

I drove past, turned around in the road, and went back to follow her in. When we were well along the curving, darkened street, R. J. said, "Stop. I want to drive so you can look for her car. I can't see well enough."

We traded places, and R. J. drove on slowly while I peered out at the mammoth houses, enormous lots, abundant tree trunks—all in the dark of a moonless night, illuminated only by our headlights and the lights from the widely spaced homes.

"There!" I said. We had rounded a sharp turn, and at the top of a small hill ahead of us I suddenly saw the now familiar taillights, no longer glaring red. The Mercury was pulled onto the shoulder of the

curbless street, and when we passed it slowly, we could see that it was unoccupied. On the other side of the roadway fifty feet farther on stood an old fashioned rural mailbox, and in the sudden gleam of our headlights I could read the name on it: J. DUBEK.

R. J. read it, too. He braked to the shoulder a few car lengths ahead of the Mercury, and we both got out and walked across the dark street to stare down a sloping, half-wooded stretch of ground at a large, modern, L-shaped house about fifty yards away. The house was illuminated by outdoor security lighting, so we saw the form of Vera Busse quite clearly as she approached the front door from the end of a long, curving driveway. She carried the pistol in her hand, holding it downward at her side.

"It doesn't make sense," R. J. said. "But—" He put his hand on my shoulder. "I've got to stop this. You stay put." Then he ran off toward the entrance of the drive and out of my view.

I stood there feeling ungainly and helpless, feeling sick and afraid. Vera Busse had reached the steps to a small covered porch, where she halted briefly before stepping up and pushing the doorbell. Then she turned sideways to screen the pistol with her hip and waited. R. J. wasn't going to get there in time, I thought, and even if he did, she held the pistol. I stepped halfway behind a tree and yelled, "Vera Busse! Vera Busse!"

She jerked around and looked out at the dark landscape from the lighted porch. An egg-sized stone

arched into the illuminated area and smashed against the door-frame before it bounced off her shoulder. Then a second stone, smaller and thrown very hard, hit her on the side of the neck. Again I yelled, "Vera Busse! Vera Busse!" But she turned toward the driveway and fired the pistol three times just as a bearded man opened the door behind her and peered out tentatively. He said something I couldn't make sense of and slammed the door closed, but not before Vera Busse whirled around and fired at him twice. She then dodged off the porch out into the darkness away from the house.

And for a long moment I stood frozen in fear.

Vera Busse, I forced myself to think, Vera Busse—what will you do now? Are you reloading that pistol? Somehow I knew that R. J. was all right, was coming up with his own plan, was thinking about me and the unborn child within me, and that freed me to think about Vera Busse and what she would do, what she was doing, what she had done.

I turned and walked along the edge of the road until I was opposite the Mercury. Then I skittered across and tried the handle. It was unlocked. I got in quickly and locked the door behind me; I searched around the car, feeling along and under the seats before I opened the glove compartment. And there it was—her backup gun, a small revolver.

Five seconds later I looked up and saw Vera Busse herself, glancing left, glancing right, glancing

down, as she unlocked the passenger door of the car. She must have crossed the road and approached from the opposite side. She opened the door still looking left and right and started to get in, then she froze in place.

"Oh, crap. The pregnant princess," she said. I had the revolver trained on her in the lighted interior, and she hesitated for a second or two with a tired, regretful expression on her face. The automatic was in her right hand, which she was using at that moment to brace herself against the car door. She stepped back to regain her balance and had started to bring the pistol around when two things seemed to happen at once.

The first was simply this—I shot the pistol out of her hand.

At the same instant R. J.'s flying form crossed my view, smashing into Vera Busse and taking her down and away, down and away and out of my sight. I got out and rushed around to where R. J. was yanking the woman up from the ground. I could hear faint, distant sirens, and all at once the horror and fatigue of the evening's events overcame me.

"I've got to go lie down now," I said. I handed him the revolver and stumbled off to our car.

I don't remember anything else about that night.

### *R. J. Continues*

When your client is gunned down before your eyes, you ought to do something about it.

That was one of my thoughts, anyway, tucked in the middle of all the other hard thoughts I was hav-

ing that night as I drove Ginny home to the three-flat. Because of her condition the police who showed up had let us go after I made a quick statement. The evidence was clear enough, even for thick-headed suburban cops like Leo Schmidt and his crew, that Vera Busse had attempted to kill Joe Dubek, and the news was out by then that Dubek's brother and another man had been shot down elsewhere earlier in the evening. They read her her rights and hauled her off to be booked for attempted murder pending other charges.

As for my client, the two slugs he took had left him comatose, in critical condition, and quite probably not long for this world, a state of affairs that made all our evening's efforts seem even more wasted and futile than otherwise. Vera Busse was being charged and jailed, true enough, but only after the damage was done.

And Ms. Busse seemed about as useful to the police as the Browning .32 she'd used. The pistol wasn't going to tell anybody anything about who had hired out the killings—or why—and neither was she.

I don't want to make too much of it after all these years, but the drive home that night was not one of the high points of my career. Ginny was lying uncomfortably on the back seat, half in a state of shock and as worried as I was about the toll all the stress and emotion she'd been through might have on her pregnancy. But I could tell, at the same time, that she was also, almost in spite of herself, trying to make sense of the murders.

"R. J., the clue is the man who was killed," I remember her saying behind me. "Don't you think? The first one? Find out who he is . . . and also . . . it's silly, I know, but I'm hungry. Do you think cookies and milk? I don't feel bad now physically. Just tired. You're the one who . . . Do you suppose Local 143 means anything? The baby's all right—I'm hoping. What don't we know? You took down that phone number, but there was something you told me right at the beginning . . . I don't mean to sound like a caricature, but ice cream—and we have some—fudge ripple. I bought it as a surprise . . . I'm sure I'll be all right, though. I'm praying, anyway. And it's much better that we were together . . ."

Later, just before we pulled into the garage, she said one more thing: "The brothers were at odds, R. J. That's a crucial consideration. And Vera Busse played a role in their disagreement—the time she spent working at Filtration Systems. There was something you told me, right at the beginning . . ."

I led her up the stairs, made her sit with her feet up and her eyes closed, brought her ice cream and cookies. Had some myself.

My own thoughts, meanwhile, were hard to evaluate. Three hours earlier I'd wanted out of the case, and what I'd seen and done in the intervening time ought to have reinforced that desire—but it hadn't. Instead I felt like I'd been led to the edge of a cliff blindfolded and given a quick shove. I'd survived the fall, but the experience rankled. Also the thought that the cops were



probably going to use my eye-witness testimony as an excuse not to look any further than Vera Busse's jail cell for the perpetrator of the crimes. In the first place, it was my experience that cops like Leo Schmidt always followed the line of least resistance, and in the second, the earlier killings had occurred in a suburban jurisdiction notorious for its friendliness to organized crime.

And of course there was the additional hard fact that my client was fighting for his life in an intensive care unit someplace because I hadn't been smart enough or fast enough or good enough, even with Ginny's help, to head off Vera Busse in time.

So after I got Ginny settled in bed, I went back out to the kitchen to wrack my brains over a bottle of beer, wondering among other things what the heck it was that I'd told her "right at the beginning."

Just to pass the time, I dialed the seven-digit number I'd taken down in the Busse woman's apartment that afternoon, not necessarily expecting a response at eleven fifteen P.M. The number ended with two zeroes, which made it a business phone, and in those tired old days before the spread of answering machines and voicemail, a lot of business phones tended to ring and ring at that hour of the night. This time I listened to just one buzz, however, before a bored-sounding woman came on the line and said, "United Assemblers' and Packers' Union."

After a long hesitation I heard my own voice saying, "Is this . . . some kind of answering service?"

"That is correct, sir."

"But—" My mind fumbled around. "But this is the number for Local 143, isn't it?"

"That is also correct, sir."

"Okay," I said. "Good. I'll call back tomorrow." Then I hung up the phone, after which I sat down at the table, drank the last third of my beer, and tried to keep an open mind. Then I looked another number up and dialed again.

"North Park Police."

"Hi. This is Johnson at the *Sun-Times*. Are you giving out yet on the victims in that double homicide? I've got a deadline."

Two minutes later a detective named Benetti came on. "Your guy was here," he said.

"I can't help that. He hasn't called in, and I've got a deadline. You're Benetti, so I'll quote you direct. Who were the victims?"

"That's Joseph Benetti, pal: B-E-N-E-T-T-I. First victim was John Salerno, age forty—"

"What about him?"

"You don't know much, do you."

"I know how to spell Benetti."

"So don't forget. Union Local 143 was having this banquet. Johnny Salerno used to be president, but last year he moved up to the national—"

"He's young, then."

"Yeah. Also dead. Survivors—a wife and two children. He'd come back for the banquet—"

"From where?"

"Philly. The thing was a hit. He met this guy in the lobby—"

"Name?"

"Charles Dubek."

"Oh. The third victim's brother—"

I've got all that. Anything more on Salerno?"

"No."

"Anything new on motive?"

"Look, pal—when you've charged a suspect and got the weapon and a witness, motive don't mean squat."

"I guess not, if you say so. Anything you can let me have on the witness?"

"Uh-uh. Not for publication. But I'll tell you this much off the record—the guy better be bulletproof."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Because the way I see it, the thing don't shape up as bean bag, you know."

And that, of course, was the last of the hard thoughts I'd been having.

When I eased the Chevy to a stop, the time was twelve twenty-six A.M., I was in a suburban location roughly halfway between the two murder sites, and if appearances were to be trusted, I was the only human being in a half-mile radius who had anything on his mind besides sleep. I watched through the rear view mirror as the stop lights at an intersection two blocks behind me changed color and thirty seconds later changed color again; then I got out of the car, cut through a narrow, unlit parking lot to a pitch-dark alley, and trod down the middle of it one quiet step at a time. When I was fifty feet along, I blinked on the flashlight I was carrying and glimpsed animal eyes that ducked, heard paws that scurried away.

One side of the alley was shrub-

bery and fencing that masked the back yards of houses; the other was an irregular row of one story brick structures—the unadorned backs of stores and offices, all dark and deserted for the night.

All but one, I suddenly realized, the next to last. Probably not by coincidence it was the one I was headed for: the offices of Union Local 143.

I edged along until I was next to the dimly glowing window. It was open a little at the bottom. When I peered down through dirty panes and Venetian blinds three-quarters shut, I could just make out the gray-thatched top of a man's head above the back of a chair. The man's left hand held a long, freshly lit cigar, and cigar smoke was seeping in to the night.

I crouched down to put my ear next to the quarter-inch slit, held my breath, and thought deep, dark thoughts about people who smoke cigars. After thirty seconds had passed, I concluded that the man was alone and was about to move away when the aborted ring of a telephone sounded and the man said quickly, "Yeah. Walsh."

A long silence ensued before he finally went on, "No. I said to call here because—what do you think? I want anyone else to know about this?" Another pause. "Uh-huh. So where'd this guy come from? . . . Hell. . . . All right, sure." An extremely long pause. "Jeez—I don't know. Sounds crazy to me. But . . . All right, all right—only come here first . . . No—the both of you. I'll wait." He put down the receiver without saying goodbye.

More surveillance, I remember groaning to myself. I'd come with the idea of breaking and entering, but those activities didn't appear to be on the agenda. I stood up cautiously, and when I peered down again through the slats of the window shade, I could see that the man had left the chair, but I couldn't see much else. After ten minutes or so of blind waiting, I slipped a few paces down the alley and turned my flashlight on and off, trying to find a box or a board, anything at all to stand on.

I turned back as the rectangle of the window suddenly glowed brightly from behind me, and for an instant I caught a glimpse of a man's profile, an anxious looking masculine face staring out into the darkness. When the blinds remained open after the face drew away, I moved farther along into a recessed loading area for the adjacent building and tried to decide what to do next.

Surveillance, I thought. The word was becoming the humorless punchline of an unfunny joke. It came to me that—temporarily, at least—what I needed to be watching for was the arrival of the man's confederates, which meant that I needed a hiding place. I blinked the flashlight on and off, on and off, taking quick sightings of the loading area behind me and the shrubbery across the way; then I moved off again in the direction of a large metal drum along the wall at my back. I tipped it on its rim and wheeled it by half turns a few feet nearer the edge of the alley, crouched behind it and waited,

wondering which direction the man's friends were likely to come from.

Ten more dark minutes passed, full of tension and boredom, worry and night sounds, until headlight beams swung into the alley at the far end. I shrank against the curved metal, holding my breath for no rational cause, until a long, pale vehicle with Mars lights on the roof rolled past me and pulled to a stop next to the bushes opposite the rear of the union offices. It was a police cruiser, and a moment after it stopped, a man and a woman slid out of the front on the driver's side. The man carried a pistol and the woman's wrists wore handcuffs, and even in the dim light from the car's interior I recognized them both.

They were Leo Schmidt and Vera Busse.

I was back at the window just in time to see the nervous man, Walsh, step up to Vera Busse, still in her handcuffs, and slap her hard across the face.

"Hey!" exclaimed Schmidt in his piping voice. "What's that for?"

"It's for a doublecross," Walsh said in reply. "Didn't Sweetheart here tell you? Salerno wasn't part of the deal."

"Then I don't get it."

"You're not supposed to get it. That's the point. Chuck Dubek thought he was fingering Salerno, but he was fingering himself, all right? Salerno was supposed to see it happen and stop being such a wiseguy. Only the bitch here was sore at Salerno because they had a

thing on for a while, only he dropped her cold when he went to Philly." Walsh turned to the woman and said, "Still missing that Italian cooking, eh, Vera? Well—you're gonna miss it forever, now."

When she didn't respond, I inched nearer so I could see her better. There was a large bruise on her neck from the rock I'd thrown at her, her clothes were dirty and rumpled, her hair was all over the place, and her face looked battered, both physically and emotionally. If I hadn't watched her gun down three men without blinking, I would have felt a lot sorrier for her than I did.

"She was a rod for the outfit a few times," Walsh went on. "That's what got Johnny's blood moving, I'd say. So he worked a deal for her with Chuck Dubek that I wasn't told about till later: give her a job at Dubek's company and 143 won't try to organize the place. Great cover—right, Vera?—because nobody's gonna look for a hitter on a nickel-and-dime assembly line."

"I was an inspector," she said in a tone that was half defensive, half resigned.

"You were pathetic. You take so goddamn many pills you don't know which end is up half the time."

"Johnny's fault," she said in the same tone as before.

"I guess he's paid the price."

Walsh waved the others toward chairs, then sat with his back to me in the one behind the desk. "I ought to blame myself, I guess," he said, "for trying to be too subtle. Dubek wanted to play games with

me about what he knew, so I decided to play a different game with him: 'Here's the name of a hitter,' I told him, 'somebody you already know. Put the finger on your pal Salerno at the banquet, and you can have the hundred grand you think you're worth.'

"Then the bitch shows up, scares Johnny back in line, takes out Dubek, takes out Dubek's brother as cover, and blows town. A simple enough little plan, don't you think, that the pair of you managed to screw up."

"I didn't," said Leo Schmidt. He was a large, burly man with a handsome, freckled face and ginger-colored hair. "Joe Dubek asked me for the name of a good private eye, that's all."

"And you had to name this Carr character."

"I was supposed to name Joe Blow? Carr's good, and I owed him one."

"Yeah. And now you owe him another. So tell me your plan again. I need a laugh." Walsh took a pair of cellophane-wrapped cigars from his shirt pocket and tossed one at Schmidt. "Sorry I don't have a joint for you, Vera, but you know how it is: that stuff's against the law. You want a drink?"

She shook her head and stared at Walsh with an expression of stony resignation. As for Schmidt, he sat beside her fumbling with the cigar and giving off the impression of being totally out of his league in corruption.

"Look," he said, gesturing nervously, "my point is, Carr's not going to leave it alone. I know him. Like

I told you on the phone, his brother's a captain of homicide in Chicago, and Carr'll figure that gives him enough clout to keep nosing around without being bothered. Which means he'll be looking at Local 143 as hard as he can, don't kid yourself that he won't. So why not take him out tonight, before he gets started? Vera's in custody the whole time—right now she's in transit from my lockup to Cook County jail. Only they don't expect her till morning. She does the job, comes back, the gun Carr gave me gets mislaid—and in a couple of days the case goes flat and she's released. No motive, no witness, no weapon."

"Witnesses," the woman said. "The pregnant princess, too."

"That's right, yeah. Carr's wife was along, so—"

"And pregnant?" said Walsh. He hesitated for a long moment, then went on, "All right. I guess she's already made orphans out of Johnny's kids tonight." He pointed his cigar at Schmidt. "But it sounds risky as hell in a bunch of different ways as far as I'm concerned."

"It is risky as hell," Schmidt responded. "And for me more than anyone else. But my point is, leaving Carr loose even a day is a bigger risk."

"For me, maybe, but not for you, Leo. So what do you think you're going to get out of doing this stuff? A Boy Scout badge for loyalty?"

Schmidt stared blindly at the half-shaded window, and I could see the fear in his eyes. He licked his lips. "Something was said about a hundred thousand dollars. I'd like half that."

"Plus your grand a month? We're a labor union, Leo—not the policemen's pension fund."

"For a labor union you wash a lot of money and run a lot of numbers in my town—statement of simple fact."

In the silence that followed this remark, Schmidt's complexion went from red to paste.

"You know," Walsh said finally, "you're beginning to sound a little bit like Chuck Dubek. Another statement of simple fact. But . . . all right. If that's how it has to be, this is how it is: twenty-five for you—and twenty-five for Vera. You're gonna owe Leo, Vera. Work it out between you."

The woman looked at the two men in turn before saying, "Yeah, yeah, okay. But if I'm gonna do it, I'll need a gun and a car. Quick." She spoke in a flat, uninterested manner and her face was almost void of expression, but what I saw in her hard, blank eyes from outside the window was a vision of the future so immediate and inevitable that I thought the two men inside with her couldn't help but see it, too.

"I dug up a pistol for the job," Schmidt said. "It's cold, but you'll have to bring it back and let me get rid of it."

"Yeah, whatever," the woman replied. "What about the bracelets?" She stood and let him unlock the handcuffs, then stepped back against the door, flexing her arms and shoulders.

Walsh, meanwhile, stayed sitting at the desk, watching Schmidt as the latter put the handcuffs in one pocket and pulled a small, snub-

nosed revolver from another. "The car's a problem," Walsh said.

"I'll hotwire one," was the police chief's response. "Don't worry—we'll get her on the road." He turned away from the others, broke open the pistol, and started feeding shells into its chambers.

"That's a crappy little piece of iron," Vera Busse said. "Let me see it."

When Schmidt turned to hand her the gun, I couldn't wait any longer. I banged at the window and shouted, "Schmidt! For God's sake—no!"

But by then it was too late. She snatched the pistol and fired two shots into his guts and three more at Walsh inside of a couple of seconds. Schmidt fell back looking stunned and then was firing, too—wildly—with his police special. As I ducked away from the window I heard the sound of shattering glass, and in that instant the room went completely dark.

### *Ginny Concludes*

"And then?" I asked. The hour was six thirty A.M. We were eating a very early breakfast at the kitchen table of the three-flat in anticipation of going to bed on R. J.'s part and returning to bed on mine.

"Oh," he answered, shrugging. "The usual thing, at least on this case. Surveillance of a kind, meaning stumbling around in the dark, waiting for something to happen. Not that it lasted long."

"If you had taken a pistol with you..."

"Yeah—but my plan was just to break in and nose around an emp-

ty office. The answering service picked up the call I made, remember, so I thought the coast was clear. How was I to know that anybody else was dumb enough to go out there that late at night? And besides—"

"Yes?"

"I didn't want to wake you up getting a pistol out of the safe."

"So you decided to give me heart failure instead with a love note on the kitchen table—which I just happened to read at one thirty in the morning: *Checking out Local 143. Sleep tight. Don't worry. Don't worry—grrr!* Do you mind if I have another piece of toast?"

"Nope. Drop two and I'll join you."

"All right," I said. "But I'm holding your piece hostage until you get back to the story. Things looked extremely grim. The lights in the room blinked out; bodies were falling left and right; you were outside in the dark unarmed; and then—"

"Well, short of running off, the safest strategy seemed to me to get behind the police car and wait for developments—which is what I did."

"And you weren't afraid?"

"I didn't have time to be afraid. And the truth is that I was still pretty amazed by what had happened. I'd waited outside that window, you know, watching and listening, and I could tell exactly what was going on in Vera Busse's mind the whole time. She wasn't thinking about you and me, Ginny—not at all. She was thinking about a gun and a car for a getaway, meaning Schmidt's pistol and the police cruiser in the alley. But even more,



she was thinking about scoring off this pair of overbearing creeps who were making fun of her and shoving her around. I still can't believe that they didn't see it, too. Right up until the moment Schmidt handed her the gun I thought he was just stringing her along.

"But he wasn't—not that way, anyhow. So there I was, crouched behind the car with a flashlight, a coat pocket full of tools, and a vague idea that I'd heard her fire the little popgun five times, which gave her one more round if she happened to make a run for it."

"And if she didn't happen to acquire Schmidt's pistol along the way," I added.

For a moment R. J. didn't respond. He stared away from me with an absent look as if he were reliving the event in his mind. "The back wall of the building was dark," he said finally, "but the doorway was darker, and after all the shooting, things seemed very quiet and still. I rested the flashlight on the trunk of the car and stayed low, listening more than anything else. After a minute or so I heard the latch on the building's rear door give a snap, and through it came a pale spot of a face and a shape too slim to be anyone but Vera Busse. She carried something in one hand that had to be a pistol, and although that wasn't a surprise, it didn't make me happy.

"I had a small jimmy in my own hand. On impulse I tossed it down the long stretch of the alley. As soon as it hit the pavement I flicked on the flashlight. Then I dodged down to the other end of the car—"

"And you weren't afraid?"

"What? No—because I was too busy. Only not quite busy enough. She snapped off one shot at the flashlight and then ran right past me as I came roaring around the front bumper.

"And that, Ginny, was when I looked up and saw Leo Schmidt there in the black doorway, looking pale and sick in the glare from the flashlight. I stopped dead in my tracks because I didn't know what else to do, and if I ever was afraid in the whole affair, that was the moment. But I don't think Schmidt even saw me—or if he did, he didn't let on. He stepped into the alley and shouted, "Halt, Vera Busse—in the name of the law!" And when she kept running, he fired three times at her back, and she slid down on her knees, then fell forward."

R. J. stopped to sip from his coffee cup, a gesture that reminded me suddenly of the toast in the toaster. It was almost cold, so I put it down again. "But how—" I began, turning back toward the table, and in that moment the answer came to me. "He loaded blank shells in Vera Busse's pistol," I said.

"Right." R. J. nodded. "But there were live enough shells in his own. He wanted to be a hero, Ginny, a big, brave, bring-'em-in-alive hero. As soon as she left to come over here and knock us off, he was going to arrest Walsh on the basis of what Walsh had told him, then call us up so that we could take Vera Busse for the second time in one night. In either version, in other words, the plan was so full of holes that it

would never have come off, but as far as Vera Busse was concerned, he must have thought she was a wind-up doll or something. He may have wanted to be big and brave, but it doesn't help much if you're as dumb as a post."

I confess that my mind by then was on a different player in the drama. "And was she . . . dead?" I asked as I buttered the toast and tried to stay calm.

"No—she's hanging on by a thread, just like Joe Dubek. Walsh is the one who's dead. He took one of Schmidt's stray bullets in the throat and bled to death before we got back inside."

"Oh dear."

"Yeah. You see, when Schmidt heard that Local 143 was involved, he knew Walsh well enough to know that the guy had to be behind it all. And this is what he says, at least: he owed me a favor for the Butler case, and he didn't think we were safe as witnesses. I had the same feeling, to tell the truth."

"Yes," I said. "But that isn't all. He was trying to redeem himself, too, for being weak in the past. I'm sure of it. Covering up a hired killing is not the same as accepting a bribe. You're not . . . going to mention the thousand dollars a month to anyone, are you?"

"What thousand dollars a month?" He made a face of extreme mental dullness. "It's funny, though. Now that it's over, Vera Busse is the one I feel sorry for. She's a hired killer, but . . ."

"Yes. But at least she turned out

to be human," I said, "not just a heartless automaton. She loved and hated and suffered. I think—or rather, it makes sense to think—that her main reason for faking the dizziness, which is what brought us into the affair in the first place, was simply depression. She couldn't face Filtration Systems any longer after Johnny Salerno left her in the lurch."

"And so she shot him at the first opportunity instead." R. J. sighed. "It's funny how this whole business works on that kind of mixed-up logic."

"Wouldn't you say rather that everyone seems to have had a hidden motive? Chuck Dubek and Joe Dubek were disingenuous with each other, to say the least—Chuck Dubek especially. Walsh's murder plot was absolutely serpentine, while your friend Leo Schmidt's was hardly less so."

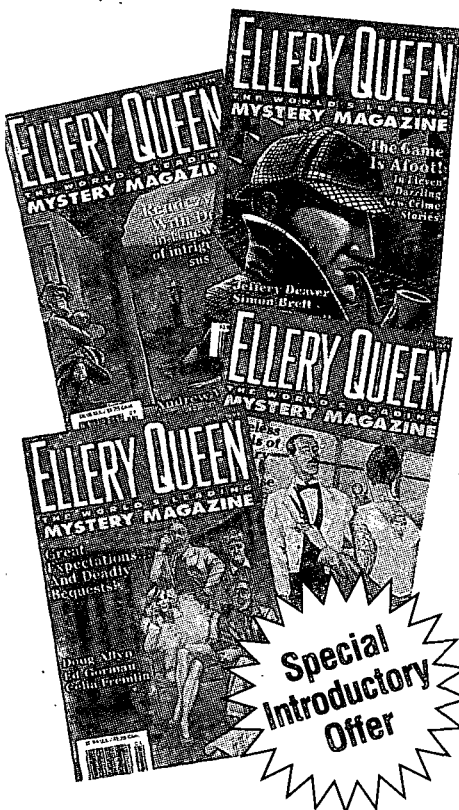
"I guess. And if you take them in that particular order, each one seems stupider than the one before." He shook his head. "I'll tell you this much, Ginny: when I go in to the office tomorrow and write up a file, I'm not going to call it the Dubek Case or the Busse Surveillance or anything at all in the usual line, so if you ever need to look for it, don't try to be logical."

"No?" I said.

"No, because there's only one title for it as far as I'm concerned, and that's what it's going to be—something I called it right at the beginning, in fact, now that I think about it: The No-Brainer."

# 4 MYSTERY MAGAZINES

## just \$5.95!



When it comes to knock-'em-dead detection, nobody outdoes *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*.

To introduce you to the award-winning fiction of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, we'd like to send you a special value pack of four favorite issues for just \$5.95 plus shipping.

You save 50% off the regular price.

To get your value pack, fill out the coupon below and mail it to us with your payment today.

### PENNY MARKETING

Dept. SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

☐ **YES!** Please send me my *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine Value Pack*. I get 4 back issues for just \$5.95 plus \$2 shipping and handling (\$7.95 per pack, U.S. funds). My satisfaction is fully guaranteed! My payment of \$\_\_\_\_\_ is enclosed. (EQPK04)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

(Please print)

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_

State: \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_

Please make checks payable to Penny Marketing. Allow 8 weeks for delivery. Magazines are back issues shipped together in one package. To keep prices low we cannot make custom orders. Add \$4 additional postage for delivery outside the U.S.A. Offer expires 12/31/02. 022C-NHQVL2

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# THE MYSTERIOUS MR. KIM

Martin Limón



**T**he old woman tugged so fiercely on my shirtsleeve that I almost toppled off of my barstool.

"You save my son!" she screamed.

My partner, Ernie Bascom, set down his frothing brown bottle of Oriental beer, swiveled, and

grabbed the elderly woman by the worn cotton of her loose Korean tunic. I regained my balance and grappled with her for a moment, and soon Ernie and I wedged her between us, me waving my open palm in front of her nose and telling her, "*Choyong hei.*" Calm down.

My name is George Sueño. I'm an agent for the 8th United States Army Criminal Investigation Division in Seoul, Korea. Ernie and I were off duty, bar hopping through the red light district of Itaewon and, as we were wont to do, hoisting a few wets. About the last thing we expected was to be assaulted, for no apparent reason, by an hysterical old woman.

The out-of-tune rock band twanged their last note and then stopped playing, their mouths open, gawking at us. The GI customers also stared. As did the "business girls," their nightly work interrupted in mid-hustle.

The old woman stopped screeching long enough for Ernie and me to walk her over to a corner table. I sat down next to her, patting the back of her bony hand.

She had to be in at least her early sixties. Most of her teeth were missing. The strong brown eyes in the center of her face were enveloped by the burnt wrinkles of someone who had spent the better part of her life toiling in muddy rice fields. When it seemed that she wouldn't start grabbing on me again, Ernie returned to the bar and brought over our drinks.

Now that she had our attention, she spoke in rapid Korean. Breathlessly. So fast that I had trouble following and asked her to repeat herself more than once. Finally, I managed to absorb the outlines of her story.

Her son had been arrested, tried, and convicted of that most horrible of crimes: murder.

The case wasn't exactly un-

known to us. In fact, it was the biggest flap to hit 8th Army in years.

A U.S. Army doctor, Captain Richard Everson, had been stabbed to death in one of the narrow back alleys behind the flashing neon of Itaewon. An icepick was found at the scene, and smeared blood confirmed it as the murder weapon. The apparent motive? Robbery. Captain Everson's wristwatch, fraternity ring, and wallet were all missing.

Since the crime occurred outside of a military reservation, jurisdiction for the case fell squarely on the capable shoulders of the Korean National Police. With the international spotlight on them, the KNP's wasted no time. All known thugs in the Itaewon area were rounded up, and soon—after interrogations involving rubber hoses—a suspect was identified. Choi Yong-kuang was his name, the son of the woman sitting in front of us. He had accomplices. Three other young men who were members of his gang, according to the KNP's, but all three of the men had testified that it was Choi Yong-kuang who had actually done the stabbing of Captain Richard Everson.

Why had they killed Everson when they already had him outnumbered and disabled? Sheer meanness, according to Choi's former comrades. Choi Yong-kuang had just wanted to watch an American die.

Although Ernie and I had monitored the case—as had everyone else in 8th Army who worked in law enforcement—we hadn't actually worked it. No Americans had.

I explained this to the old woman. She would have to talk to the KNP's.

Of course she already had.

"They told me to leave them alone, and when I refused, they did this to me." She pointed to a puffed blue welt on the side of her face.

I had been translating for Ernie as we went along. He turned to the old woman and said in English, "What the hell do you want us to do?"

She understood and answered in broken English. "My son rob American doctor," she said, "but my son no kill him. His friend, they all lie because Korean police beat them up. Somebody come later, after my son take money, go and stab doctor with icepick. You Americans. Everybody in Itaewon say you C.I.D. You can find out about American doctor. Find out who want kill him."

Ernie shook his head. "There's no reason in the world, Mama-san, to think that the killer was anyone beside your son."

"Yes. There reason," she answered. "Korean police, they know. Icepick come from drink place up top hill. The Silver Dragon."

The most expensive nightclub in the Itaewon bar district.

"How do they know that?"

"They know many things, but they no say."

"Why not?" Ernie asked.

"I don't know. You ask them. You find out."

Ernie shook his head again. "This isn't our case," he told her.

The old woman leaned forward and grabbed his wrist in a white-knuckled clench. "If I have money,

I give you, but I no have money. Next week, they kill my son."

The Korean judicial system doesn't tolerate endless appeals or long waits on death row. Within a month or two of arrest, convicted murderers are on their way to the gallows.

"If my son die," she said, "then I die." She sliced her thumb across her throat.

Ernie glanced around at the swirling interior of the smoke-filled bar. The business girls had become bored with us and were back to hustling GI's. The rock band was blaring again. Waitresses were busy slamming down bubbling bottles of Oscar, a locally fermented sparkling burgundy.

Ernie crossed his arms.

"No can do," he said.

With that, the old woman closed her eyes, fighting back tears. A moment later she started rocking back and forth, mumbling some Korean folk song.

Her singing grew louder. So loud that I could no longer hear the rock band or the hubbub of the thousand voices that surrounded me.

I could only hear her ancient song of death.

Later that evening, after the old woman left, Ernie and I walked up the hill to the Silver Dragon Club.

"What the hell," Ernie said. "Won't hurt to look."

The joint was more elaborate than the other dives in Itaewon and the chairs even had upholstered seats. Also, club policy was to hire only waitresses with straight legs. With all these amenities the Silver Dragon Club was twice as expensive as the other local bars and as



such was mostly patronized by civilian businessmen and American officers.

The bartender wore a white shirt with its sleeves rolled up and his collar held close by a black bow tie. I leaned over the counter. With a glistening metal pick, he chopped into a blue-white block of ice.

"What happened to the old icepick?" I asked.

He looked up at me as if he'd been shocked by electricity.

"You policeman?" he asked.

I showed him my badge.

He pointed down the hill. "Then you go ask Korean policeman. They know everything about icepick."

"Maybe you can explain it to me," I said. Ernie fondled a delicate glass goblet, tossing it up in the air, catching it, while keeping his eyes riveted on the bartender. The young man swallowed.

"Miss Tae, she took it."

"Who's Miss Tae?"

"A waitress. She used to work here. Same night GI doctor killed, she take icepick go. Never come back."

"You told the Korean police this?" Ernie asked.

The bartender nodded.

"Did Miss Tae know Captain Everson?" I asked.

The bartender looked puzzled.

"The GI who was killed," I explained.

The bartender shrugged. "How I know? Miss Tae take icepick, she go, she never come back. That's all I know."

"You saw her take it?"

"Yes. She told me she bring right back. So I say okay. She lie."

Ernie returned the bartender's goblet. Unbroken. We walked down the hill toward the Itaewon district office of the Korean National Police.

Lieutenant Pak Un-pyong had handled the investigation into the homicide of Captain Richard Everson. He wasn't in at this time of night, but when I flashed my identification and told the desk sergeant what we wanted, he called Lieutenant Pak at home.

Fifteen minutes later Lieutenant Pak walked into the big concrete bunker of the Itaewon Police District. He was a tall man for a Korean, thin even by Asian standards, with a hooked nose and a no-nonsense cast to his sharp features. He waved to us, and without a word we followed him down the hallway to his office.

We sat on two metal chairs in front of his desk. I spoke first, asking him about the icepick and the waitress known as Miss Tae.

Lieutenant Pak reached in the top drawer of his desk, pulled out a pack of Turtle Boat brand cigarettes and offered us each a smoke. When we turned him down, he struck a wooden match, lit up, and leaned back in his rusty swivel chair.

"We've been waiting for one of you Americans to ask this question," he said.

I hoped he'd explain, but instead Ernie spoke up. "This Miss Tae took an icepick from the Silver Dragon Club," Ernie told Pak. "She disappears. Captain Everson turns up murdered with an icepick. What's the connection?"

Lieutenant Pak let out a plume of

smoke. "She's the girlfriend of Choi Yong-kuang."

The convicted killer and the son of the old woman who'd harangued us into looking into this case.

It came together quickly for Ernie.

"So Captain Everson is hanging out at the high-class Silver Dragon Club," Ernie said. "Spending plenty of money because doctors make more than regular officers. This Miss Tae spots him, fingers him to her boyfriend, and Choi Yong-kuang and his partners jump him and rob him. She delivers the icepick so Choi can silence Everson for good."

"That's what we think," Pak said.

"But why kill Everson?" I asked. "He was down. They had his money and his watch and his ring. Why make things worse on themselves?"

Pak continued to puff for a moment and then finally spoke.

"Maybe they wanted to make sure that he couldn't identify them. Maybe they thought he would have more money on him than he did and they would all leave Seoul together, and they didn't want us following. Maybe Choi Yong-kuang hates Americans. Maybe he was jealous because Miss Tae had been having an affair with Everson. Maybe a thousand things. Who can say?"

"And Miss Tae disappeared?"

"We haven't been able to find her. Her mother lives alone in Masan. We checked. No sign of her daughter. The local police are keeping an eye out for her in case she shows up. So far, nothing."

The way Ernie was fidgeting, I

could tell he didn't like Lieutenant Pak's explanation any more than I did.

"There has to be more to this case," I said.

Pak shrugged.

"If you don't find Miss Tae and if this guy Choi is executed, we'll never know for sure."

Pak shrugged again. "The government's happy."

I knew what he meant. The Korean government receives millions of dollars from the United States each year to help in their defense against the communist regime up north. When a Korean kills an American officer, that special relationship is at risk. The way to save grief is to have the case closed quickly. Hanging Choi Yong-kuang would make a lot of government bureaucrats breathe easier.

"What is Choi's story?" I asked.

"He says that he and Miss Tae had originally planned to murder Captain Everson. That's why she brought the icepick. They thought he was going to be bringing a lot more money. Supposedly, so he could buy Miss Tae out of her contract with the Silver Dragon Club, so she'd be free to quit work and live with Everson. An old trick. But Everson didn't bring the money; he was using Miss Tae just as she was trying to use him. Choi says that when they realized Everson didn't have more than a few dollars, he was furious. His partners ran away, Choi claims, but finally he didn't have the heart to murder a helpless man. He dropped the icepick and left while Everson was still breathing."

"Miss Tae had already left?" I asked. Pak nodded. "And a few minutes later, one of your officers found Everson's body."

"A routine patrol."

"How long had he been lying there?"

"Hard to say. It was a dark walkway, seldom traveled. Could've been as much as an hour."

"Plenty of time for someone else to come along, grab the icepick, and murder Everson," Ernie said.

"That's what Choi told the judge. Nobody believed him."

"Plus," I said, "it's more convenient for the government not to believe him." Pak shrugged once again. I leaned across the desk and stared into Lieutenant Pak's dark eyes. "There's a reason you came out here at night to talk to us. You're not certain Choi is guilty."

Pak stubbed out his cigarette. "If I had jurisdiction, I would search further into Captain Everson's background. But I don't have jurisdiction on your American army compound, and besides, my superiors are satisfied with the resolution." He raised his open palms toward the ceiling. "What more can I do?"

"But we can do more," Ernie said.

Lieutenant Pak smiled at him like a teacher indulging a bright student.

"Yes," he answered. "You can do more. You can do much more."

The next day at the C.I.D. office, I looked over what records were available concerning the Everson case. Fake Burrows and Felix Slabem, two of our fellow C.I.D. agents, had been assigned liaison duties.

They'd studiously regurgitated the translated record of the Korean police version of events but had done no investigative work themselves.

Their reason for showing so little curiosity was simple. In the army, the less you know the safer your career.

Ernie and I performed our routine blackmarket detail duties that day, but when I found a spare moment, I made a few phone calls. What I was trying to determine was the identity of Captain Richard Everson's best friend. I found him: Bob Quincy, an engineering officer who had shared quarters with the late Captain Everson on 8th Army's South Post.

Early that evening Ernie and I paid Quincy a visit.

He was a portly man with a round face and round spectacles and a pugnacious air that caused him to stare straight up at Ernie's pointed nose.

"You had to have some idea of what his social life was like," Ernie said.

"I don't believe in speaking ill of the dead."

"Speaking ill? What the hell are you talking about, Quincy?"

Quincy turned away and stalked down the long hallway of the Bachelor Officers' Quarters toward the dayroom. We followed. A green felt pool table and a TV sat unused. The room was empty. He plopped down heavily in a padded chair.

"I thought it was all over," Quincy said. "I thought no one would come around asking me questions."

I grabbed a three-legged stool and sat opposite Quincy.

"A man's life depends on your truthfulness, Captain Quincy. Anything you say will be held in a file classified Secret."

He nodded, sighed, and let out a long burst of air.

"Dick Everson jogged a lot," he told me. "He was in good shape, and that's part of the reason he was so popular with the ladies."

"What's the other reason?"

"He's a pediatrician. You know how women love pediatricians."

I didn't but I let him talk.

"So he gave a few speeches at the Officers' Wives Club. You know, on the welfare of children in the Command, on what the OWC could do to help, things like that."

Ernie pulled out a stick of ginseng gum and unwrapped it. "So Everson hooked up with a couple of wives," he said.

Quincy swiveled his round head and frowned at Ernie. "Only one wife." We waited, the silence growing longer, hoping he'd tell us who. Finally he answered the unspoken question.

"I don't know who she was. Dick Everson was a gentleman. He'd never talk. But every night when he put on his jogging suit and went out for a run, it always lasted a lot longer than it should have. At least an hour. More often two. And he came back smiling."

"How can you be sure he was meeting this woman?" I asked.

"He told me. I could tell something was up. I didn't pry, but he told me that she lived with her husband in quarters on post and he reassured me that this woman had no children."

"That was important to him?" Ernie asked.

"Yes," Quincy replied. "He would have no part in traumatizing kids."

"Decent of him," Ernie said.

"But he didn't give you her name?" I asked.

"No. Like I said, Dick Everson was a gentleman."

"Boffing a fellow officer's wife," Ernie said. "Doesn't sound so gentlemanly to me."

Quincy's face flared red.

"He broke up with her," he said. "She didn't want to, but he knew it had to be done."

"When?" I asked.

"Two months ago. Maybe three."

After that, Ernie shot some pool. I asked a few more questions, but they didn't go anywhere. When I finished with Quincy, we left.

Nothing else in Captain Richard Everson's military life seemed in any way unusual. Ernie and I weren't exactly sure where to take this unofficial investigation. At least we weren't sure until that night in Itaewon when we ran into Choi Yong-kuang's mother again. She had been waiting for us on the road that leads from 8th Army headquarters to the nightclub district.

She grabbed my sleeve. Pleading with me. Telling us she had someone she wanted us to talk to.

Miss Tae, the former waitress at the Silver Dragon Club, did indeed have long, straight, beautiful legs. She showed them off by wearing a short skirt and keeping them crossed at the table in a Korean tea house where we met.

After having escorted us to the tea house, Yong-kuang's mother made a discreet departure.

"When I left Everson," Miss Tae said in Korean, "the icepick was still on the ground, the GI doctor was alive, and Choi Yong-kuang had run away, too."

"Why don't you tell this to the Korean police?"

"They would beat me. Make me tell them what they want to hear. So they don't lose face and have to admit that they were wrong."

I wasn't so sure if that was true. Not for Lieutenant Pak Un-pyong anyway, the chief investigator in this case. But it was true for the institution he represented.

"So who killed Everson?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"Then who does?"

Ernie couldn't take his eyes off of Miss Tae's legs. I concentrated on her face. Too heavily made up for my taste, but I could still admire the darkly lidded narrow eyes and the gentle curve of the smooth white flesh beneath her high cheekbones.

She sipped on a porcelain cup of green tea, set it down, and then spoke. "To find out the truth, there is a man you must talk to. He paid us to murder Captain Everson."

I almost choked on my tea. When I recovered, I translated for Ernie.

"Paid you?" he asked.

She turned to him, speaking in English now. "Yes. But we no do. We no can do."

"Let me get this straight," I said. "Someone paid you and Choi Yong-kuang to kill Everson, but you couldn't go through with it?"

She nodded. "After we left, someone else kill Everson."

"Maybe this man who paid you," I said.

She nodded again.

"What is his name?"

"He called himself Mr. Kim."

I groaned inwardly. The most common name in Korea. More common than Smith or Jones in the United States. Miss Tae continued.

"Mr. Kim come in Silver Dragon Club. Quietly. Wearing hat and sunglasses. He watch me with Everson. When Everson leave, he talk to me. Find out I have boyfriend who is *kampe-i*." Gangster. She was talking about Choi. "Later he meet us both and offer us money to murder Everson."

"Did he say why?"

"No. He never say. But one thing . . ." Miss Tae ran her long fingers along the edge of her teacup. "He strange."

"Who?"

"Mr. Kim. I don't think he hate Everson. I don't think he even know Everson."

"Someone else wanted Everson killed?"

"I think so."

"But you don't know who," I said. Miss Tae shook her head. I kept asking questions but was unable to pull any further information from her. When his turn came, Ernie asked her questions having nothing to do with the Everson case. Before we left, Ernie had convinced her to go out with him. The date was set for the next week, Tuesday. In her new job, in a nightclub downtown, Miss Tae wasn't off until then.

Ernie was willing to wait. "You think she's lying?" he asked.

We were walking down the brightly lit main drag of Itaewon.

"Probably," I answered. "This mysterious Mr. Kim is a convenient scapegoat. But if she's telling any part of the truth, it could mean that someone else actually did murder Captain Everson."

"Like who?"

I had an idea. But I didn't want to say anything yet. Not without proof.

The next morning I was on the phone again, identifying myself as a C.I.D. agent and asking questions. After about a dozen calls and a trip to the 8th Army housing office, I had the information I needed.

We sat at a table wedged against a side wall of the big Quonset hut that serves as the 8th Army snack bar. I sipped coffee. Ernie glanced at my notes. "Thorough," he said.

"Thanks."

What I had done was obtain a list from the Housing Officer of all the accompanied quarters on South Post along with the names of family members, and therefore I had a list of all the wives who lived on South Post. Almost two hundred names. First I crossed off all those who had children. The remaining list was about three dozen strong. I crossed off the enlisted families, and then I was down to twenty-six names.

"How'd you eliminate names after that?" Ernie asked.

"I made phone calls to their husbands' units. Found out what shifts they worked."

Ernie slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand. "Of course. Everson used to visit her at night. So her husband had to work nights. Probably a swing shift."

"Probably. That left us with three names."

"So we go talk to them?"

"No. I've narrowed the list down to one."

"One?"

"If I'm right, and if this woman were somehow involved in Everson's death, she would've had to be able to persuade a Korean man, this mysterious Mr. Kim, to take the risk of approaching Miss Tae and Choi Yong-kuang and paying them to commit murder."

"So she'd have to have a helluva lot of influence over him."

"Right," I answered. "A helluva lot."

Ernie glanced again at the three names. "Two of these women don't work at all. What are they going to do? Offer their houseboys a pile of money to have somebody killed?"

I nodded. "But the third..."

Ernie whistled. "Big money," he said.

The third entry was Gladys Hackburn, the wife of Colonel Orin Hackburn. She had her own career, a good one. Her current position was contracting officer for the 8th Army Procurement and Facilities Office. She was a woman who made the final decision on the disbursement of millions of U.S. taxpayer dollars to local construction contractors.

She was a woman with power.

Before we approached Gladys Hackburn, I made a few discreet in-



quiries at the 8th Army Procurement Office. The biggest contract currently under construction was a Top Secret Signal Intelligence Facility actually being built into the side of a mountain south of Seoul. The dollar figures involved were staggering, and the Korean contractor with the most at risk was a wealthy businessman named Roh Ji-yun. From his background security check folder, I pulled his black-and-white mug shot. That afternoon I made a phone call, and a few minutes later Ernie and I drove our Army jeep out to the same tea house where we had met Miss Tae before. She was already waiting.

When I pulled out the photo of Roh Ji-yun, her eyes popped wide.

"That's him," she said. "Mr. Kim."

She was so impressed that Ernie almost convinced her to spend the rest of the afternoon with him at a nearby inn. I frustrated his plans.

"We have work to do," I told him.

Ernie pouted.

Miss Tae merely seemed amused.

We found Roh Ji-yun at one of his construction sites. He wore expensive slacks, a silk tie, and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. An orange hardhat balanced atop his big square head.

When I told him what we suspected, his face turned crimson, and spittle erupted from fleshy lips.

The punch was a surprise.

Most Koreans swear a lot when they're angry, but usually they don't hit.

I managed to dodge the blow, and then three of his assistants were on

him, holding him back. He continued to curse in Korean, Ernie hurling epithets in English. It was obvious to me that we weren't going to coax much information out of him.

But for now we had enough.

At the 8th Army Procurement Office, Gladys Hackburn's secretary kept us cooling our heels in Ms. Hackburn's outer office for almost twenty minutes. Finally we were allowed to enter the inner sanctum.

She sat at a large teak desk, the flags of the United States, the United Nations, and the Republic of Korea draped behind her. She wore a powder blue business suit, and her reddish hair was cut short and curled up in a wave that framed a youngish-looking oval face. When she stood to shake our hands, I could see that she maintained her figure at least as well as had the late Captain Richard Everson.

She smiled brightly.

An intelligent woman. A caring woman. A woman willing to help.

"What brings the C.I.D. to the Army Procurement Office?" she asked.

Instead of answering, I tossed the black-and-white glossy of Roh Ji-yun onto her desk. A puzzled frown crossed her face. She glanced down at the photo but leaned back slightly as if she were afraid to touch it.

"You had him follow Captain Everson," I said. "To set him up for murder."

She stood perfectly still for a moment. Ernie and I both held our breath, wondering if she'd break down or tear the photo up or start

screaming at us and call the MP's to escort us out of her office.

She did none of those things. Instead she sat down slowly and interlaced her well-manicured fingers atop the varnished surface of her desk as if composing herself to make a speech in front of the Parent-Teachers Association. She cleared her throat and then spoke.

"I loathed him," she said, "for what he did to me. The lies he told me. The promises he made about our future together." She shook her head as if trying to rid herself of a bad dream. "But we had no future together. He was just using me."

"So things didn't work out," I said. "And the plan to pay someone to kill Everson slowly grew in your mind. But you weren't sure if it would work. So you followed, to make sure the job was completed. And when you saw him lying there in that alley and you were all alone and the icepick was lying beside him..."

"Yes," she said calmly, staring directly into my eyes. "I killed him. I picked up the icepick, and I stabbed it into his heart. And what's more," she said, her face as smooth as stone, "I'd do it again."

It took a while for the paperwork to be completed at 8th Army, translated, and then formally transmitted to the Korean National Police. It took even longer for the KNP's to send their report to the judge in charge of the Everson case. So long, in fact, that they almost hanged

Choi Yong-kuang for the murder of Captain Richard Everson despite the fact that we had a confession from Ms. Gladys Hackburn.

Finally, though, a few hours before the sentence was to be carried out, Choi was released from prison. His mother was there to greet him, of course, along with Miss Tae.

When the sun went down, Ernie and I made our way to Itaewon. We were ensconced on our usual barstools in our usual club in the heart of the nightclub district. The band had just taken their break when Choi Yong-kuang's mother tugged once again on my shirtsleeve.

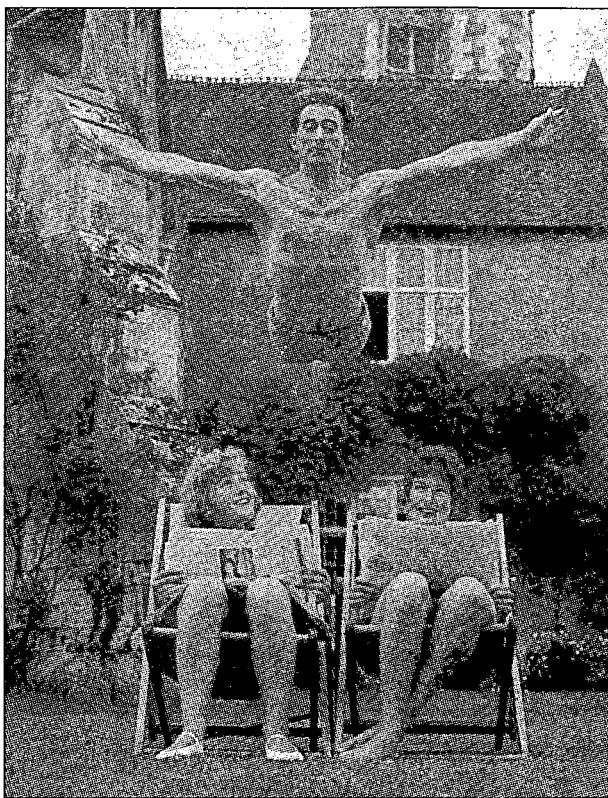
This time she didn't pull me off the barstool, but I turned around anyway.

Everyone watched. The bartenders, the waitresses, the business girls, and even the GI's, because they were aware of the man who'd been spared from hanging this morning.

Choi Yong-kuang's mother didn't speak. She simply kept her head bowed, holding three sticks of burning incense in front of the billowing folds of her red silk Korean dress. Then she knelt to the floor, leaned forward, and lowered her head three times to the dirty tile.

It was sort of embarrassing. Ernie tried to laugh it off. I kept a straight face. For decorum's sake, mainly, but also so no one would notice the pressure building in my eyes.

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Hulton Archives

One day, son, you're gonna hit the front page! We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "April Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

---

The winning entry for the November Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 144.

FICTION

# SISTERS

Bentley  
Dadmun



Illustration by Meredith Lightboun

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 4/02

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

---

I don't own a car. I pedal a bicycle. It's a gray and black mountain bike with front suspension, big knobby tires, and twenty-some-odd gears. The yellow and red trailer attached to the bike is meant to carry small children but suits my handicapped cat just fine. Fluffed up on the bottom of the trailer is my ex-wife's beloved quilt that her mother, The Bitch That Blames, put together when she was in the old country. Cat seems to like it.

For me, pedaling a bike is part of being self-reliant. It's having my self-esteem based on intrinsic choices instead of depending on the media, government, and the slathering hordes for guidance on how to live my life. Admittedly I may be something of a misanthrope, but I like to think that has little to do with my autonomy. One must make life's decisions based on logic, reason, and common sense.

Head bent into the howling wind, my face set in a half-frozen grimace, I dropped another two gears, stood on the pedals, and pushed against the blinding snow that came hissing out of the night. Trying to follow the bouncing beam of my light with eyes reduced to ice-rimmed slits, I sensed more than saw the farm's driveway. I dropped another gear, pedaled harder against the two or three inches of snow already on the road, and turned.

The sudden change in wind direction caught me unprepared. I skidded wildly, made all the wrong corrections, and slammed down on the rutted, frozen sand. I struggled to my hands and knees. Head bent

between my arms, I kept my eyes shut and mentally took inventory. After a few moments I decided I was still functional.

I popped the light off the handlebars, crawled to the trailer, and unzipped the cover. Deep from the recesses of the quilt, two little eyes glowed back at me. I heard a plaintive meow, and a deformed paw came out of the quilt and touched my face. I zipped the cover back up, pulled the bike upright, and pushed bike and trailer through the moaning blackness toward the faint lights of The Farm.

The Farm is owned and run by Annie Kokar, an exacting, formidable woman in her seventies. Although in the middle of that proverbial nowhere, seven miles from the nearest anything, The Farm is home to seventy or eighty of the aging mass of people for whom the American Dream will always be just that . . . a dream.

Bent over, I slogged through the snow until I reached the middle of the barn. I struggled with a warped door, pushed the bike through, and leaned it against a thick support beam. Breathing like an asthmatic goat, I knelt down, again unzipped the trailer cover, put a cold hand into the depths of the quilt, and withdrew Cat.

She gazed at me with half-closed eyes, yawned, and pawed at my chest. I unzipped my windproof jacket, lifted my sweatshirt and sweater, put her in the sling across my chest, and buttoned up again. Then I leaned against the beam and steeled myself for the journey across the pasture to the boat. Just



another ten or fifteen minutes and I'd be home. Warm, safe, fed . . . and warm.

"I was getting a bit worried about you, Harry. I know the Good Lord takes care of fools, but pedaling a bicycle at night in a snowstorm is beyond foolish, and I thought He might have closed the door on you."

I turned. A small, puffy form, swathed in down, Thinsulate, and two or three other forms of insulation, stood just inside the door. Two little eyes, much like Cat's, peered at me from deep within a fur-lined hood. I wiped melting snow from my face and tried for a smile, but my face was still thawing and I couldn't quite make it happen. "Gretchen offered to put me up for the night, but I thought I could make it back before the worst of it hit. And your Lord is obviously off somewhere else closing doors."

Mildred came a little deeper into the room and pulled the hood back, revealing a stern, furrowed face with very clear blue eyes set above a classic Roman nose. She snorted. "Harry, you're truly a—a—well, never mind. It just seems that every time I want to talk to you, I have to endure frustration. I felt like one of those old Nantucket whaling women standing up on their widow's walks scanning the seas. Only I was on Annie's porch, staring out at snow-blasted darkness." She shook her head. "Honestly! Pedaling home . . . in the dark . . . in a snowstorm!"

"Mildred, whatever you want to converse about can wait." I patted my chest, which brought forth a meow. "Right now Cat and I are go-

ing to the boat, where we will warm our tired bones, gorge ourselves with our respective nutritive delights, and probably engage in a titanic contest of Wrestle the Hand."

"That can wait. Right now I'd like you to come to The Barnyard and talk to Hannah March. She's been waiting."

"Hannah March? I don't think so, Mildred. You're a sterling human being, but right now trying to make nice with one of your buddies is not on my list. Maybe tomorrow."

She grabbed my arm. "Please. She needs help with something, and I told her you might well be the help she needs."

"Mildred, I'm not a social worker, I . . ."

She gripped my arm tighter. "Harry, join the human race just for this night, an hour at most. I'm asking you as a friend. I'm asking you as a fellow human. I'd say fellow Christian, but that's wishful thinking. I said you'd talk to her. Honor my promise. Empathy, Harry . . . Empathy. It's what separates us from crocodiles and cockroaches."

The front half of the second floor of the barn is our multipurpose room. It's a kitchen, dining hall, and lounge. Toward the back are several islands of cast-off furniture rescued from the living rooms of once-cherished homes that had to be sold to pay for a triple bypass or to remove a breast, or simply because trying to live The Dream became overwhelming.

Sometimes it's better to live in a barn.



It used to be that at supper every table had a bottle of wine at its center. It was the one thing that would, on occasion, bring me out of the boat and across the pasture. But costs rose, and some of the non-drinkers complained about the easy availability of demon rum. And after Orilla Peterson got lost in the East Pasture trying to find her way back to her trailer, Annie decided enough was enough.

There was a hue and cry from the drinking quarter, and after due consideration, Annie, who is known to have a liking for the grape, gave the okay to construct a bar in the back of the barn on the ground floor. After days of heated planning sessions from at least seven different hastily formed committees, construction began. And weeks later The Farm had its own tavern. Naturally they named it The Barnyard.

With Mildred at my side I walked through the ground floor of the barn, stopped before a plywood door painted a bright green with an ineptly rendered cow in the middle, and sighed inwardly. Mildred gave me a little shove, and I pushed open the door and walked in. The Barnyard is a smallish room with a pine and plywood bar on the left and several homemade tables standing on the thick floorboards on the right. Everything is painted various dark shades and the lighting is subdued. There's no mirror on the backbar. Who wants to gaze at one's flaccid, seamed face as they drink? Instead there's a huge print of dogs sitting at a table playing poker that someone donated. Herb Rico, an ob-

noxious retired stonemason, built the large fireplace against the outside wall, and four foot birch logs crackled and popped and sent the smell of burning resin to meld with the smells of spilled beer, old hay, and ancient manure.

Three of the eight barstools were occupied by lumpy forms with gray hair. They were huddled over beers and staring up at the television hung on the wall. On the screen John Wayne, dressed in cowboy garb, was pretending to do manly things.

Mildred led me to an unpainted plywood table, and I pulled out a rusty folding chair and sat down to the right of Hannah March. Hannah had come to The Farm a few months before, and we had a nodding acquaintance. After I refused two Sundays in a row to drive her to church, our nodding acquaintance became decidedly frosty.

Mildred nodded at her. "I'm sorry for the wait, Hannah, but Harry just now returned from town."

Hannah gave me a sour look, pushed several bills across to me, and said, "Whatever you want. I shall have a glass of wine, and get Mildred whatever *she* wants."

Bartending at The Barnyard is a haphazard affair. Often it's self-serve with an honor box beside the gin bottle. But tonight Florence Good, a tiny woman with a face of a thousand wrinkles, was manning the helm. I took off my windbreaker, sweatshirt, and sweater, pulled Cat out of the sling and put her in the center of the table, and walked to the bar. Florence stopped gazing up at John Wayne and drifted over

to me. I nodded and said, "Three glasses of your best."

She smiled and, with some effort, pulled a gallon jug of red wine out of a plastic cooler and filled three glasses imprinted with images of comic book characters. She put the glasses in front of me. I gave her three bucks and went back to the table, set out the drinks, and sat down. I gave myself the glass with Spider-Man on it.

Mildred had Cat in her arms and was kneading the loose fur around her neck. I raised my glass in a toast and said, "Mildred tells me you have a problem you want to discuss."

Hannah took a long pull of her drink and said, "I don't know if it could be considered a problem. I would say it was more of a puzzle."

Mildred set her wine down, coughed, and said, "An expensive puzzle."

Cat wormed out of Mildred's arms, limped over to me, and meowed. I scruffed her small head and put her on the floor. She sniffed the air, then limped toward the fireplace. I looked at Hannah, lifted my palm, and raised my eyebrows. She took another long pull of her wine and muttered, "This stuff isn't that bad."

"Mrs. March, I'm tired. If you have something to say, I'd appreciate it if you'd get to it."

Mildred gripped my arm and whispered, "Harry! Don't be so—"

Hannah waved at Mildred. "Of course. I'm sure you've had a long day, Harry. Mildred, perhaps you would be so kind as to get us another wine, please. Well, where to

start? My sister Esther died almost three years ago on a Sunday. Bradford, her husband, had died about a year before that. What we thought was indigestion turned out to be an abdominal aneurysm. Esther had congestive heart failure and was quite frail. She died in bed with my other sisters, Lillian and Darleen, at her side."

Mildred returned with a small tray and passed out the wine. Hannah gave me a quick, horse-toothed grin and downed half of hers before Mildred got reseated.

"When Bradford died, he left some insurance and the house. My sister Lillian and her husband Charlie moved out of their apartment and into the house. The understanding was, in return for caring for Esther, they would live there rent free. When Esther died, they got the house. Until three months ago I lived in Florida and was taking care of my husband. His illness and subsequent death devastated me financially, and Mildred talked to Annie Kokar and . . . well, here I am, living in a barn. Can you imagine?"

I sipped my wine, smiled encouragingly, and nodded. Hannah swigged more wine and continued.

"As I said, Bradford did have some insurance and minor investments. But he worried about providing for him and Esther when they were old, truly old. So whenever he got a little money ahead, he bought a stone."

"A stone?" I said.

"Yes. Precious stones. Emeralds, rubies, sapphires, I'm not really sure what else. He assumed they

would appreciate and be worth quite a sum of money in the coming years. Obviously he didn't intend that death would take him so soon.

"After Bradford died, Esther wasn't sure what to do with the stones, and in the end she wrote that she just kept them. She said that when I returned to New Hampshire she would divide them up, that she really had no use for them, as she was now being well taken care of. She hinted on several occasions that I would get the lion's share, as we were very close. After that, she began to get . . . confused, disoriented. Sometimes when I called she would sound very . . . well, I guess demented is the correct term. Lillian and Darleen were quite worried. Then she died.

"She left the house to Lillian and Charlie, her minivan to Darleen, and a few pieces of furniture to me. But the stones were missing, are still missing, and nobody claims to know where they are. There was no safe deposit box. Lillian and Darleen and Charles searched the house but said they didn't find anything, and—well, nobody seems to know what happened to them."

I finished my wine, stood up, and looked around the floor. I saw Cat by the fireplace. She was on her back, all four paws in the air, soaking up the heat from the fire. "I don't think so, Mrs. March. What you want is the police or a private detective. I'm neither. And I doubt I could make any headway. If you want, I can give you the name of a good policewoman who'd most likely . . ."

She waved a hand at my face,

reached inside a large black purse, and pulled out an envelope. She put the envelope on the table and tapped it with a fingernail. "If you wouldn't drive me to church, Harry, I surely wouldn't expect you to look for the stones for naught. That's a fee. I'll also pay any reasonable expenses."

I picked up the envelope, lifted the flap, and eyed several hundred-dollar bills. I closed the flap and stared at the fire for a few moments. Then, smiling like an injury lawyer advertising his wares on television, I said, "All right."

The storm still raged, and the trek across the pasture was a minor adventure that left me wondering about the sanity of Arctic explorers. I live in a thirty-six foot mahogany sailboat cradled in the middle of a grove of hardwood in the middle of the North Pasture. The boat's mast, keel, and rudder reside in the farm's illegal landfill, but the hull is solid and it makes for a comfortable home away from the teeming masses and their follies.

I climbed the ladder, got the hatch unlocked, and dropped into the main cabin. To conserve the batteries and the propane that runs the generator, I turned on just one light and put a match to several candles. After letting Cat out of the sling, I knelt in front of the stove, put in some kindling and a few chunks of maple, and blasted the arrangement with a propane torch. Then, with a sigh that echoed in the dark cabin, I sat by the stove and held out my hands to the dancing flames.

I was staring into the flames thinking about rubies and emeralds when Cat's dish bounced off the front leg of the stove and came to rest upside down by my leg. Cat limped up, hooked her good paw under the dish, and flipped it over. Then she put her bad paw in the dish, looked up at me, and meowed.

To avoid unrelenting harassment, I struggled to my feet and filled Cat's bowl with the little brown pellets she so dearly covets. Packed with nutrients and smelling like dead carp, the little brown pellets are at the top of Cat's priority list, evenly ranked with naps. I fixed myself eggs and toast and sat on the settee. As I ate, I toyed with the five one hundred dollar bills Esther had given me, and thought about sisters.

**T**he storm was thrashing about somewhere east of us, leaving behind a morning that was two degrees above zero and a Sun that bore down with a ruthless, razor-edged brightness. With Cat snuggled in the sling, I trudged through hard, crunching snow to the barn. I removed Cat's quilt from her trailer, and we proceeded to a snow-covered lump parked near the old tractor shed.

As I said, I don't own a car. But a while ago I helped a young girl named Mulligan solve numerous problems. Mulligan ended up living on The Farm as a result. Her Great-aunt Gretchen, the only relative of worth she has left, made the points that she'd like to see Mulligan once in a while and that riding in the

trailer with Cat left something to be desired. Thus I had her late husband's VW camping van on permanent loan.

I swept snow off the windshield, checked fluids, and climbed in. When I turned the key, needles moved in gauges, a labored whine sounded from somewhere, and after a few moments, current and gasoline surged to the appropriate places and the motor sputtered to life. I hauled Cat out of the sling and put her on the quilt on the front passenger seat. Then I sat and hugged myself and waited for things to warm up.

Ten minutes later the van was toasty warm. I found a gear and headed down the driveway. Cat was wandering around the back checking for critters, and Beethoven was blaring from the PBS station on the radio. Not quite as good as pedaling through a raging snowstorm at night, but close.

Esther Jenkins had lived in a small house that was one of four perched on barren plots on an unpaved road at the west end of town. Tall dead weeds poked through the snow in the front yard, and the house was in obvious need of work. A nine- or ten-year-old Subaru was sitting in the unplowed driveway. If Lillian and Charles had stolen the stones, they were being discreet.

I was about to put Cat in the sling when I saw a black longhaired cat sitting in the front window watching us. Curled next to it was a tiger cat. The tiger was huge, with unblinking yellow eyes that were as warm as the ice hanging from

the eaves. I gave Cat a pat on her scarred head, put her on the quilt, and plodded up the unplowed walk to the door. I didn't see a bell, so I gave the door a few whacks and waited.

When it opened, a plump woman with a round, sagging face and frizzy white hair stared at me. I nodded, smiled, and said, "Good morning. My name is Harry Neal. I live at the same farm as your sister Hannah. She asked me to act on her behalf and inquire about Esther and Bradford's estate." I forced my face into a wider grin. "May I come in?"

Lillian blinked several times. "Estate? Goodness, what is she thinking of? The estate was settled over two years ago." She backed up several steps, looked to her left, and yelled at the top of her lungs, "Charlie! We have company! A friend of Hannah's!"

As I walked in, I heard grunting and scuffling and caught a glimpse of a big man dressed in brown pushing some sort of cabinet. Trying not to be obvious, I quick-stepped into a living room cluttered with too much furniture and saw the man scurry down a hallway.

The living room was carpeted with thick, new looking carpet. Crammed next to a cabinet with glass doors was a huge television with the largest screen I've ever seen. A brown leather sofa and matching chair were against the wall facing the television.

Lillian, a rather desperate-looking smile pasted on her face, waved a hand at me and said loudly, "You'll have to forgive the mess, Mr. Neal.

But me and Charlie have been down with the flu and are just now getting back on our feet." She twisted her face into a perplexed frown. "About Esther's estate, the probate was completed months and months ago, and everything was in order. Me and Hannah and Darleen signed it and everything." She went to a round dining table heaped with papers and magazines, took a pile of newspapers off a chair, and gestured. "Here. Please. Sit down. I just brewed a pot of coffee, if you'd like some."

I nodded and sat down just as Charlie, wiping his hands on his trousers, lumbered into the room. Lillian gestured at me. "This here is Harry Neal. He's a friend of Hannah's, and she sent him to ask some questions about Esther's estate."

Charlie was a hulking man with about thirty pounds of fat hanging over his belt. His fleshy face was dominated by sad, baggy eyes shadowed by bushy, kinky eyebrows. He held out a calloused paw and made an effort to crush my hand. "What's that woman got in her craw now? We got everything settled and signed over two years ago, at the probate. It was understood that we'd get the house. It's a damn shame Hannah lost her husband and all her money, but that's the way of things. Besides, this place ain't that much better than that barn she's living in. And she doesn't have to worry about paying for the heat, or the electric, or when something goes . . ."

Lillian, gripping a cup of coffee with both hands, tapped her husband's leg with her foot. "Charlie,

why don't we wait and see what Mr. Neal has to say." Smiling fiercely, she put the coffee in front of me. "There's cream and sugar by that stack of magazines."

As I poured cream into the cup, the black cat jumped on the table, sat down, and stared at me. Seconds later the tiger was beside it. They both gazed unblinking at me as I tested the coffee. When I put the cup back in the saucer, I saw both Lillian and Charlie glance down the hallway. Then, side by side, arms hanging loose, they looked down at me. I reached out and kneaded the tiger cat's muscular neck. "It's about the stones," I said. "Hannah is wondering what happened to the stones Bradford collected."

They stared at me. Then Charlie rolled his red eyes and said, "Them goddamn things. Let me tell you, Esther had a diamond wedding ring that was worth a few dollars, and we would have buried it with her 'cept that's against the law, so Lillian sold it and gave everyone, including Hannah, an equal share. That was the right thing to do. And Esther also had this house, which we got, and some insurance money that Hannah and Darleen got. But them stones hadn't been around for a duck's age. I saw them once maybe three, three and a half years ago, a pile of colored stones, looked like something you'd buy at K-Mart. But like a lot of us working folks, Esther and Bradford fell on hard times, and I'll bet you anything you care to name that they sold the stones to get some cash money."

"Charlie's right, Mr. Neal. Esther and Bradford showed us the stones once or twice. They said they were good investments, but to me they were just little pieces of colored glass. But she stopped talking about them. Like Charlie says, they got into some money trouble 'cause of their health and most likely had to sell them to get some cash." Lillian waved a hand at the cats. "If Midnight and Tiger bother you, just push them off the table. They can be a nuisance."

While I talked with Lillian and Charlie, I was automatically scratching ears and kneading necks. The cats purred, and the big tiger put a paw on my sleeve and pulled. I said, "Hannah is quite sure that Esther didn't sell the stones, that she still had them when she died."

Charlie rolled his eyes. "Jesus Christ! I..."

Lillian put a hand on his sleeve, gave me a weak smile, and said, "The thing is, Mr. Neal, Hannah was never close to Darleen—that's our other sister—and me. She's the youngest of the four and, well... she was always... distant. And she may like to think Esther still had those stones, but Darleen and I spent Esther's last weeks with her right here in this house and she never uttered a word about them. I'm quite sure they were sold long ago when Bradford took sick."

I nodded, pushed the tiger back on the table and stood. Picking up my coffee cup, I headed for the kitchen, off the hall. Moving like a two-man drill team, Lillian and Charlie shuffled back and stood in



the hall entrance. "I'll take care of it, Mr. Neal," Lillian said, reaching for it. "I'm gonna run the dishwasher soon."

I glanced between their heads and saw about a foot of the wheeled cabinet sticking out of a door at the end of the hall. I smiled at them. "Well, I'm sorry if I intruded. But Hannah and I are friends, so I told her I'd stop by. I'll tell her what you told me, and I'm sure that'll be the end of it. If I . . ."

The front door opened, and a woman who looked like an older, heavier Hannah walked into the room. She was followed by a smallish man in a wool checked jacket. Relying heavily on a cane, he limped in behind the woman. His free arm swung from his shoulder like a hunk of rope in the wind.

They stopped in the middle of the room, looked at Lillian and Charlie blocking the hallway, then looked at me. Lillian said, "Darleen, Grover, this here is Harry Neal. He's a friend of Hannah's, and she sent him here to see if we knew anything about the stones Esther and Bradford used to have."

Darleen and Grover stared at me, then slowly turned their heads and looked at each other. Darleen said, "I don't know what Hannah has been feeding you, Mr. Neal. But those stones went down the pike some time ago when Esther and Bradford were having money troubles. Why she thinks they're still around I don't know, but I assure you they aren't."

"Yes, that's what I've heard," I said. "And from the sound of it you're right. As I told Lillian, when

I get back to The Farm, I'll tell Hannah they're most likely gone."

"Maybe you will, Mr. Neal," Darleen said, "but she's heard it all before. We've gone over this thing half a dozen times. Sending you here to stir things up ain't gonna change it any."

Trying to smile at everyone at once, I zipped up my jacket and headed for the door. I paused by the huge television and looked into the glass cabinet. The shelves were filled with mortars and pestles in all sizes and shapes and materials. Some were mismatched, and some were obviously homemade.

"That's my collection of mortars and pestles," said Lillian. "I've been a collector for years. I've even tried my hand at making them."

"Listen," said Darleen, "if we want to get to Wal-Mart before the after-work crowd, we'd better get cracking."

I waved, said, "Goodbye, I'll give Hannah your best," walked out the door, and shuffled through the snow to the van. Parked behind me was a seven- or eight-year-old Plymouth minivan.

When I climbed into the VW, I looked in the back and saw Cat sitting on top of the couch. When I closed the door, she jumped-fell off the couch and hobbled up to the front. She sniffed my pants leg, then pulled on it with her good paw. I picked her up and put her on my lap. As I drove to Gretchen's, she sniffed my jacket and hands, meowed, then did it all again. As I parked the van, I said, "It's not what you think."

I walked down a dim, grimy alley between Krebs Hardware and Town and Campus Pizzeria. At the end of the alley is a gray door recessed in dirty brick. Above the door, bolted to the brick, is an unpainted slab of oak with GRETCHEN'S RESTAURANT carved in it by someone who could use a lesson or two in the use of a router. I pushed open the door and headed for a booth. Cat, who has a fondness for sugar-laced black coffee, favors the counter, where she can prowl for the desired treat. Most of the people who frequent Gretchen's qualified for AARP at least a decade ago, have been slapped by life's fickle whims more than once, and are usually tolerant of needful felines.

I, on the other hand, favor solitude. I prefer the chatter that ricochets around my own skull, oft-times propelled by a few cups of wine, than to sit, smiling like a psychiatrist, and listen to the prattle of reminiscing retirees.

Cat spends a lot of time dozing on the tables of booths.

As I headed for a booth, I saw Betty Worthen sitting at the end of the counter engrossed in the large object squatting on her plate. I changed direction, plunked down on the lopsided stool next to her, and grinned.

A few weeks before, Gretchen and her granddaughter had eaten at a restaurant in Laconia. One of the things they put under Gretchen's nose was soup served in a breadbowl. This inspired her, and she now serves her own soups and stews in round, hollowed-out loaves

of bread. I helped Cat out of the sling, tapped the crusty thing on Betty's plate, and said, "The citizens are out of control, raping and pillaging, and here you are, drinking coffee and eating what appears to be a nine pound doughnut."

Betty is a cop. We've been friends for a bunch of years and, despite our conflicting lifestyles, share basic opinions about the human endeavor. We've helped each other on numerous occasions, and ours is a friendship that needs no excuses or rationalizations.

And she doesn't bother old men who drink in the town park or chase windmills.

She grunted and tapped the remains with her spoon. "It may look like a deceased basketball, but it's delicious. I've had five or six of the damn things in the last two weeks. Beverly the Intimidator, my mentor at Weight Watchers, is not going to be pleased."

Cat pulled herself out of the sling and stumbled onto the counter. She limped over to Betty's coffee cup, stuck her head in, and found it empty. She looked up at Betty, who smiled and shrugged. She switched her attention to Betty's breadbowl, sniffing the air around it like an inquisitive mink. She reached out with her good paw and gave it a tentative pat.

Betty stroked the top of Cat's head with a finger and said, "Haddock chowder. I'm surprised there aren't a hundred and fifty-nine crazed felines clawing at the door—this thing's got about two pounds of seared haddock in it." Cat lay down, put her chin on the lip of Betty's

plate, and stuck the claws of her good paw into the bottom of the bowl sitting two inches from her nose.

Gretchen came up and put a mug of steaming coffee in front of me. I dumped a creamer into it and smiled up at her. "Your new menu item seems to be a hit."

She smiled warmly and patted her limp gray hair. "Most folks think it's grand. Can't get over the idea of eating soup outa a bowl made from bread. I tell ya, ya want the latest and best, come to Gretchen's."

"Breadbowls have been around for about eight hundred years."

She gave me a hard look and rapped my forehead with the ladle she was holding. "Mebbe so, Harry, but my soups and stews are the best things ever been put into them. If them kings and queens and knights knew what they were gonna miss, they'd have jumped into the moat right then and there." She rapped me on the head again and walked away.

I watched Betty ladle out a spoonful of creamy chunks of had-dock and eat them. As she was fishing for another spoonful, she murmured, "You're looking at me like a felon with a sudden sense of propriety."

"What does your department know about the death of Esther Jenkins?"

"Any special reason you're inquiring, or is this just random chit-chat?"

"Hannah March, her sister, is a new resident of The Farm. She seems to think all is not kosher

with the way her estate was handled."

Betty shrugged with her eyebrows. "Got a call about three years ago from her sister, a woman named Lillian. She was crying and said that Esther had died. So I stopped by and looked at the body and offered my condolences. Esther Jenkins was an old lady, and she'd been sick for a while, congestive heart failure, I think. And then she was dead. End of story."

"Could I get a copy of the autopsy report?"

"When old ladies die in their bed, there's no autopsy. None required. They didn't even need to call a cop, but most people do anyway." She looked at me the way a cop will do and said casually, "Why?"

I shrugged. "The sisters didn't get along too well, and there's a question of some missing jewelry. I was curious."

"Jesus, Harry. You getting paranoid in your declining years? I know that clan. Lillian and Charlie are closing in on eighty. They probably have problems finding the floor in the morning when they get out of bed. Charlie is a good-old-boy type, was an auto mechanic most of his life. And Lillian is your basic blue-collar matron. The other sister, Darleen, and her husband Grover are more of the same. Esther died of a bad ticker and is molding in some hole somewhere. Which is what we're going to be doing in the not too distant future. Hannah's probably yammering about that cheap stuff Esther used to wear. Tell her to go to Wal-Mart and buy some more."

Cat reared up and put both front paws on the lip of the bread bowl and dipped her head inside. The lip of the bowl gave way and she went head first into the bowl. She thrashed around until Betty pulled her out by the scruff of the neck. Both legs and her muzzle were coated with haddock chowder. Betty lifted her up high, where she dripped chowder over everything, put a few napkins on the counter, and set her down. Cat sneezed, shook her head, then raised a leg and began to lick her paw. Betty leaned forward until her nose was an inch from Cat's and said, "You're under arrest. Assume the position." With chowder dripping from her muzzle, Cat looked at Betty, looked down at her chowder-coated legs, looked back at Betty, and gave forth with a squeaky little hiss.

Betty laughed and stood, carefully put her cap on just so, touched my shoulder, and said, "Esther Jenkins is not a distant windmill, Mr. Quixote. Go back and tell Hannah that her sister is resting in peace and she should get a life."

By the time I finished my coffee Cat had cleaned herself and was casting lusty glances at the bowl again. I stood, picked her up, and signaled for a mug of wine. Gretchen put it in my hand, then dipped her hand into the dregs of Betty's supper, brought out a chunk of haddock, and stuck it under Cat's nose. Cat took it, looked at me, and I walked us to a booth.

Two mugs of wine later, I paid up, put a limp, dozing Cat into the sling, and left. As I climbed into the van, I realized that I was driving a

motor vehicle and, after three mugs of wine, was probably a promising candidate for a DUI citation. I sat in the van, letting it warm up, and debated the merits of driving back to the farm. It was dark but the night was clear, so I decided to do the dumb thing and drive home. Very self-consciously I pulled into traffic and drove around the park that dominates the Common. With both hands on the wheel and paying strict attention to business, I headed out of town.

As I passed the movie theater, I glanced at the line waiting to buy tickets and saw Lillian and Darleen and their husbands waiting their turn. I drove a little farther, then pulled to the curb and stopped. Cat came from the back where I'd put a litter box and pulled on my pants leg. I picked her up, put her on the quilt, and whispered, "I believe opportunity has knocked." Cat hunkered down on the quilt and purred.

A good sign.

**T**he one streetlight on Esther's road was out. I'd left my windbreaker and sweat jacket in the van and had my hands under my sweatshirt as I walked through the frigid night. I stopped in front of the house and looked around. Across the street, shrouded in deep shadow, were a bulldozer and piles of construction materials. A small house up the street was dark, and in Esther's house a front window glowed faintly.

So did Lillian and Charlie lock the front door? No doubt. Whatever

er was in that cabinet probably demanded a locked door. The car was gone from the drive, but there were no tracks through the snow from the front door.

Walking in the tire tracks, I crept to the garage and again looked around. The night was glacial cold, black, and silent. I waited a few moments longer, then, spurred on by the cold, stooped, grabbed the garage door handle, and said a silent prayer to Mildred's god. I turned the handle and pulled.

Charlie must have oiled the thing, for it rose silently and easily. I opened it maybe three feet, crawled under, and pushed it down. I stood and waited for my eyes to adjust. After several minutes it was obvious they weren't going to. It was too dark. I pulled out my penlight, pointed it at the floor, and clicked it on.

Charlie may have oiled the door, but organized he wasn't. The small garage was piled with old tools, toolboxes, piles of stuff covered with tarps, and an engine block. The frigid air reeked of oil and old grease with a background bouquet of kerosene. Keeping the light pointed at the floor, I picked my way through the piles, walked up three crude steps, and opened the kitchen door.

A dim light from the living room was enough to see by, so I put the penlight away. In the middle of the kitchen was a small butcher's block island. Sitting side by side on it, watching me intently, were Tiger and Midnight. I stroked and petted them, not out of any sense of kindness but to warm my hands. After

a minute of two of bonding, I went hunting.

Keeping near the walls and ducking under the windows, I crept through the living room, walked down the hall, and peered into two small bedrooms. I didn't see the cabinet, went back to the living room, and found it under an old brown and black shawl. I pulled off the shawl and dropped it on the floor. It wasn't really a cabinet; it was a small dresser on casters. I pulled open the top drawer. Inside were a couple of dozen small boxes, each with a neatly printed label on top. I put on my glasses, picked a box up, and opened it. Inside were several small plastic envelopes with pills in them. I put the box back, closed the drawer and opened the second drawer.

Perhaps twenty boxes with prescription drugs in them. I opened the bottom drawer and found two notebooks. I took one out and opened it. It was a list of names. After each name was the name of a drug, the number of pills or capsules the person desired, and a dollar amount. I put the notebook back and picked up several blank prescription pads. The other notebook contained Internet addresses. I know from nothing about the Internet, but from the wording of the addresses, I assumed they were places selling prescription drugs.

I put everything back, draped the shawl over the dresser, stared at the thing, and tried to decide what to do. I wondered how much time I had left. Movies usually ended around nine when I used to go to them. I peered at my watch. I had

over an hour and a half. Enough time to search the house for the stones? Would it be worth the time? I didn't think so, but taking Hannah's five hundred obliged me to do something. Maybe . . .

I heard the kitchen door open, and the kitchen was suddenly bathed in light. I had a heart attack or two, dropped to the floor, scooted along the rug, and using their footsteps and conversation to cover the noise, forced myself behind the couch. It was a tight squeeze, and I ended up on my stomach with my arms out in front of me and my shoulders pressed between the baseboard heater element and the back of the couch.

"What do you want?" asked Lillian.

"A bourbon on ice would be nice," answered Charlie. The couch shuddered and pushed against me as he dropped onto it. He moved around, then grunted.

"Charlie, you know what the doctor said. 'Lay off the booze,' he said. You wanna have a stroke like Grover?"

"Jesus, I've worked like a dog all my life, you'd think I'd rate a drink every once in a while. All right, gimme one of those goddamn diet root beers. And I still say we could have gone to the movies. Just because Grover has one of his spells doesn't mean we have to stop our lives."

"It would have seemed like we didn't care, that we thought more of going to see some movie than we thought of him. I hope he doesn't stay in the hospital too long this time. Darleen worries so much."

Charlie grunted. Slowly, very slowly, I eased my cramped shoulders a bit and moved my right arm farther out, alleviating some of the pressure. Lillian walked into the living room, stopped at the couch, then sat down in the chair. I raised my head a bit and saw the legs and side of the chair, most of Lillian's left arm and the back of her head. Jesus, all she had to do was . . . I lowered my head, pressed my forehead into the thick rug, and hoped she didn't.

Something pushed against the back of my right leg, then walked along my butt and back. Another something rubbed against the top of my head. I lifted my face from the floor and stared into the baleful yellow eyes of Tiger. She put her cold nose against my forehead, licked it, and began to purr. The weight on my back shifted, a cold nose touched my right ear, and warm fur wrapped around my neck.

"Don't forget Alice Procita said she wanted some of that new arthritis medicine when we got it," said Lillian.

"Yeah, yeah. But I don't think we should give that Boyer guy any Prozac. That stuff, you don't know what it's gonna do and he's seventy-five, mebbe eighty. We don't want to be killing anybody. Don't forget what happened to Hattie Grice. Jesus, I thought we were gonna be in for it for a while there."

"I'm not worried. Most of what we sell is very well known. What I am worried about is that Neal fellow. I don't think he was convinced we don't know anything about those stones of Esther's."



Charlie belched and moved his bulk around on the couch. Tiger meowed and pressed a paw against my forehead. I eased my left hand under her belly and started rubbing. Midnight moved around the back of my neck, then stretched out with her front half on the back of my head.

"Hell, we don't know anything about those stones, leastwise what the hell she did with them."

"I still say they have to be somewhere in this house. She didn't go out but four or five times the last weeks before she died, and someone was with her every time."

"Lillian, we've searched every goddamn inch of this house about nineteen times. The goddamn things aren't here. I don't know what the hell she did with them, but I'll bet anything that they aren't in this house." He slurped more root beer and belched again. "But like I told you before, the morning she died I took her some apple juice and she was carrying on about how you and Darleen were after her again about where she hid them. She was some upset and not making all that much sense, which was about par for the course. Said you and Darleen was looking to steal them from her. And I say that sister of yours knows more than she's letting on. She kept at Esther, kept trying to get her to tell, and the more she kept at her, the more Esther mumbled up and the more she got upset."

"Darleen might seem a little forceful at times and she might not have cared for Esther the way I did, but she didn't take those stones.

And we didn't hound her the morning she died, we simply asked her about them. Her expenses were pretty high, and the money from selling some stones would have been a great help. Plus we coulda bought a new car. I don't know, maybe she put them someplace when she was confused and forgot where she put them."

"Hmm. Well, if Hannah keeps prodding that Neal character and he comes by again, I guess we'll just have to play it by ear," Charlie said. "Did you talk to Darleen about Montreal?"

"Yes, she says next Thursday is fine. Did you fix the thingamajig in the car?"

"Yep. She's all set for another ten thousand miles."

"Good. Turn on the television, we may have missed the downtown movie, but we can watch one on HBO."

"But I *wanted* to see *Charlie's Angels*. If Grover wasn't feeling up to it, why the hell didn't they just stay home? Why did they have to screw up our evening?"

"Turn on the TV, Charlie."

At intervals the furnace came on, and the baseboard element heated up. I lay with Tiger snoring between my outstretched arms, Midnight snoring on the back of my head, and my shoulders pressed painfully together. I tried to tune out Lillian's and Charlie's running commentary on the movie and sweated on their new rug. The movie was something called *Death Wish*.

"Midnight! Tiger! Here, kitty, kit-

ty, kitty, come on, bedtime.” Midnight walked over my back, and Tiger got up, stretched, licked sweat off my forehead, then sauntered away. Several minutes later the house went dark except for one dim light that cast a feeble glow in the living room. I waited another few minutes, then pushed against the back of the couch, moving it out a blessed inch or so. Midnight and Tiger came back. I lifted my right hand and kneaded necks and pulled at ears until the pain became too much. The cats moved to the end of the couch, lay down, and watched me.

I waited . . . and waited. When the house had that silent, empty feeling, I slowly—very slowly—backed out from behind the couch. I eased to a standing position and, escorted by Midnight and Tiger, crept like the infantryman I never was across the living room and into the kitchen. When I reached the door, I pushed the cats away with my foot and with infinite caution opened the door an inch, pushed the cats out of the way again, opened the door another few inches, and slipped through. I managed to get across the garage and out the door without mishap. I stood outside in the snow, working my stiff muscles and savoring the chilled night air. Then I skirted around the Subaru and quick-walked the two blocks to the van.

As I drove around the Common, Cat came out from under the quilt and meowed. I picked her up and put her in my lap, where she spent the entire trip sniffing my clothes and hands. When we turned into

The Farm’s driveway, she gave a squeaky little hiss and batted my nose.

“It’s not what you think,” I said.

I forced myself to rise early, drink a hurried cup of coffee, and dress. I stoked the fire and then, with Cat snug in the sling, trudged across the pasture to the barn and climbed the rough pine stairs to the second floor. Breakfast was in full swing, most tables occupied and the clinking and clanking of silverware making an irritating undertone to the grating hum of conversation in the big room.

I went to the end of the line, grabbed a plate, and shuffled along the serving line behind Ruby Laramie, an ancient crone with pinkish hair and an obsession with other people’s business. My tray loaded with two mugs of coffee and a plate with two dropped eggs and a piece of whole wheat toast, I scanned the room, saw Mildred and Hannah, and headed their way. I felt a tug on my sleeve and looked down into the seamed, ravaged face of Ruby. Still tugging at my sleeve, she glared at me through Coke-bottle lenses and in a shaky little voice said, “People are saying that you’re engaging in unnatural doings out in them trees you live in.”

I leaned down and whispered in her ear, “It’s not me Ruby, it’s—” I stopped, looked deeper into her eyes, and instead of the smartass putdown I was going to make, I said, “They’re wrong Ruby, I just mind my own business,” and walked to Mildred’s table.

I sat down, arranged my plate

and coffee, pulled Cat out of the sling, and put her beside the plate.

Cat immediately limped to Mildred's plate, lay down and put the tip of her bad paw on the edge of the plate. Mildred smiled and petted the top of her head. Hannah frowned. "Do we really need that animal on the table while we eat? It might be carrying something. Something that could do us harm."

"Oh, Hannah," said Mildred. "I realize Cat looks pathetic, but I don't think we have anything to worry about." She gave me a blazing smile. "So, have you made any progress toward finding out about Hannah's stones?"

"Well, first of all, I'm not sure they're all Hannah's. I think a probate court would have to decide that. And second, I had a talk with Lillian and Darleen and their husbands, and it's my belief they don't know where the stones are."

"Oh, don't be absurd," said Hannah. "Esther had them in the house with her, and my sisters were caring for her. They must know what happened to them. It's obvious they duped you, Harry."

"Perhaps, but you didn't tell me Esther was often confused. And sometimes she went out. It's possible that she took them with her and disposed of them in a place she then forgot about."

Hannah gave me a contemptuous look, grabbed her purse from the floor, and rummaged through it. Finally, with a little yelp of triumph, she pulled out a yellowed, brittle-looking piece of paper and waved it at me. "Esther wrote me this letter just three months before

she died. Now, I grant you, sometimes she *was* a little confused, yes. But she was not demented. This letter is a little garbled, but she does make sense, and she does mention the stones. She says that Darleen and Lillian tried to get her to tell them where they were. And that they sometimes looked for them when they thought she was asleep."

She handed me the letter. I dug out my glasses and read. It *was* garbled, and obviously Esther was something less than With It, but Hannah was right. Lillian and Darleen seemed to be interested in the stones. And there seemed no doubt that she had the things with her.

*Sometimes they ask me about Bradford's stones, Hannah, but I don't tell them. I don't tell them anything. But I have them. I've got them in a little bag that never leaves my body.*

The rest of the letter was a rambling description of a trip she and Bradford had taken to Wisconsin many years ago.

I gave the letter back. "All right. She had them. Apparently right up to the time of her death. But I'm sure your sisters don't know where they are. I think they're as perplexed as you."

Cat's paw slid onto Mildred's plate and snagged a small piece of ham. With her eyes focused on Mildred's smiling face, Cat slowly dragged the ham off the plate. She took it in her mouth and pawed Mildred's arm. Mildred put her on the floor, and she limped toward

the fireplace with her kill. Mildred said to me, "Assuming what you think is true, and assuming that the stones were in Esther's possession, what the hell happened to them?"

"Good question. I don't know."

"Well," said Hannah, "you're surely not going to give up already, are you? That would be a pretty penny in your pocket if you do."

I poked my toast into the yolk of an egg, swirled it around, and took a bite. I sighed. "No, Hannah, I haven't given up just yet. You'll get your pretty penny's worth."

I didn't see much sense in treading on Darleen and Lillian's toes again and I didn't have any other ideas, so I spent the rest of the day puttering around the boat and reading. I usually go to bed before Cat. She likes to prowl the darkened cabin, stalking knotted up socks and cloth mice filled with catnip, and snacking. I'd built some little steps against the side of the settee so she can climb to the table and sit by the window and stare out at the night. When she's ready, she'll limp into the forward cabin, pull on my blanket, and meow softly. In what has become an automatic response, I lean down, pick her up, and put her on the bed, usually without waking up. Cat sits on her half of the pillow, cleans herself, settles down, and purrs in my ear until she falls asleep. And this night was no different. I didn't remember picking Cat up, didn't hear her cleaning rituals, which are not subtle, and didn't hear any purring in my ear.

Because she didn't purr. She put a paw on my forehead and yowled. It was a mournful, primordial sound that belonged deep in a gothic forest. I got up, put her in my lap, and massaged the muscle and scars around her neck and shoulders. Then I carefully manipulated her legs, putting her through a series of long, slow stretches that CeeCee Dorfman had taught me. After eight or ten minutes of this, she licked my hand, arranged herself just so on her part of the pillow, and was asleep in minutes. Lying in the dark, I listened to the creaks and groans the boat makes and wondered about Esther Jenkins. And like Mildred, I asked myself over and over, what the hell did she do with them?

The next morning, head bowed against the freezing wind, I trudged across the pasture. Standing between the barn and the parking lot, I looked at Gretchen's van, looked at the barn, where my bike waited, then walked to the van. I got it started and, while waiting for it to warm up, went through a complex rationalizing process. When I drove off, my autonomy, self-esteem, and sense of worth were intact.

I parked behind the college library. To avoid stern looks and harsh words from Susan Somerville, the head research librarian, I left Cat in the van. The new research wing of the library is Susan's pride and joy, and felines are less than welcome. Computers abound, and one has to search diligently to find a book, for the world's information is now in digital code

slathered on magnetized filings coating a disk. I prefer to do my research lounging in a leather chair, slowly turning the pages of a musty tome. But then I also have a fondness for Victorian architecture.

Susan wasn't at her usual station behind the plastic and wood information desk. Mildly disappointed, I went to a computer and, after a minute of punching keys, brought up on the monitor the index for the *Gazette*, the local paper. Another few clicks and I had the issue of the paper containing Esther Jenkins' obituary. I read about her accomplishments on behalf of the Garden Club, her volunteer work, and the fact that she was buried in Serene Vista Cemetery.

Okay. But just where in Serene Vista was she buried? I wandered around, wondering how I could find out, and happened by an actual book resting on top of a metal podium. The title said it was a directory of website addresses. I stared at the thing and wondered if Serene Vista had a website. After fumbling through page after page of gibberish, I finally figured it out and a few minutes later imprinted on my short-term memory: [www.Serene-Vista.com](http://www.Serene-Vista.com).

Feeling rather smug, I went back to the computer, confident that I, me, would be on the Net in seconds. Minutes later, as I stared at the screen, probably emitting noises of frustration, a young girl touched my arm. "May I help you, sir?"

I looked into a pair of very blue eyes belonging to a lean girl in a black T-shirt and jeans. Across her ample chest in bright yellow let-

ters was printed DILLIGAF. I stared into those eyes and muttered, "I'm trying to get on the Net."

"Okay. Well . . . ah, first . . . sir, it helps to be at a computer hooked into the Net. If you'll come with me, I'll show you where they are and how to find what you're looking for." She undulated across the floor. Trying to be casual about it, I followed.

Serene Vista did indeed have a website. And on it they spewed out a large and varied body of information pertaining to their cemetery and why it was a great place to be buried in. They even had testimonials: jerky little movies of older, smiling couples telling why they were going to be buried at Serene Vista, just like it all mattered. They didn't look like any people I'd seen hanging out at Gretchen's, living at The Farm, or walking the town streets.

After wandering around the website for a while, I finally found a map and plot directory. Esther Jenkins was buried in section WT, Plot 37. I printed out a copy of the map, marked Esther's plot with a pen, and, smugness intact, left the library.

I climbed into the van, got the thing started, and petted Cat, who was peeking out of the quilt. She yawned and ducked back into the quilt until the van had warmed up. Then she sat on top of it and meowed and batted my arm with her good paw for leaving her yet again in a big cold box.

I made up to Cat when we got back to the boat by putting a couple of spoonfuls of human tuna on top of her usual ration of little brown

pellets. I also put an ice cube in her water dish. After dinner she scooped it out of the dish and batted it around the cabin until it was just a sliver. Although she obviously enjoys the hell out of hobbling after ice cubes, I don't often give her one, as she frequently knocks them into inaccessible places. Then she limps over to me and demands that I do something about it, and I spend a good deal of time on my hands and knees fishing them out from those inaccessible places. Which is probably part of her game.

After a supper of PowerBars, asparagus, and Lancers Rose, I set the alarm and stretched out. As I lay awake, I stared at the ceiling and wondered, what the hell happened to my life? Where did it go? How come I'm suddenly old? Not a productive, or enriching endeavor.

When the alarm went off, I dressed carefully and gathered up Cat. After checking the propane furnace, I locked the boat and, fighting a strong wind, struggled across the pasture to the van.

Separating Serene Vista Cemetery and Wellton's Tire and Service Center is a strip of third-growth pine about fifty yards thick. Wellton's had closed hours ago and was dark except for a yard light and a single inside light. I drove around to the side abutting the trees and parked in the midst of several vehicles awaiting service or tires. After getting Cat covered up in her quilt and a spare blanket, I took off my ankle-high leather boots and pulled on a pair of thick wool socks and my old felt-lined Sorrels. Then

I shrugged into my parka, grabbed the pick and shovel from the back, and got out of the van. I reached back in, dropped a handful of kitty treats on the blankets, and whispered, "Enjoy." Cat, her eyes shining from deep within the blankets, yawned.

I should pay more attention to weather reports. The wind moaned through the trees like a mythical beast in pain. Limbs creaked from the cold, and windblown pine cones fell like tiny cannonballs. Pick and shovel over my shoulder, I struggled through the woods to the back side of Serene Vista, stood just inside the treeline, and tried to get my bearings.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped out of the trees and onto the great open field. Streetlights from the road on the other side of the cemetery cast a dim yellow glow over the thousands of tombstones poking above the snow. They cast vague black shadows that seemed to flutter in the wind. Row upon row of etched stones, each proclaiming the end of a life. As I struggled against the wind, it occurred to me that I'd never planned, nor told anyone, what to do with my own carcass when I died. And as I trudged along, I knew I probably wouldn't. It wouldn't be my problem.

On the edge of a snow-filled road, I found an iron marker sticking out of the snow. I pulled the flashlight out of my pocket and looked toward the highway. When I saw no headlights, I bent down and pushed the button. Section SB. I turned to my left and plodded along the road,



reading markers, lusting for a hot toddy, and wondering how much trouble I'd be in if I got caught.

Section WT, Plot 37, was in the southwest back corner, guarded on two sides by trees and, several plots to the left, by a towering granite monolith undoubtedly marking the spot of someone considered special but now just as dead as the neighbors. Lillian and Darleen hadn't splurged on Esther's stone. It was short and thin; given another inch of snow and its rounded top would be covered. Guided by furtive, one-second flashes from my light, I stomped out the probable outline of her grave. Then I shoveled off the snow, took the pick, and swung.

And swung and swung . . . and swung.

The earth over Esther was as hard as her tombstone, frozen solid. For how deep? Enveloped in the wailing, chilled dark, I swung the pick in high overhead arcs, slamming the point against the frozen earth again and again. Just as I thought I'd have to give up and go home (a not unpleasant thought), the pick broke through and buried itself. Several more hard swings and I removed a slab of four inch thick frozen earth and set it aside.

Now that I had an opening, it was relatively easy to break off chunks of earth, and I soon had several piles of frozen slabs piled along the gravesite. Underneath the frozen ground was sand. I took the shovel, cleared more snow, and started digging.

My back, chest, and feet were roasting, and I was sweating like I'd

just pedaled twenty miles on a hot July day. My ears and nose and the tips of my fingers were freezing. I stopped frequently and put my hands over my ears and mouth. Several times I tried to work with the parka's hood over my head, but it was like shoveling sand in an unlit closet. I kept missing the edge of the grave, or jabbing the point of the shovel into the side of the hole, creating another four or five shovelfuls of sand that had to be ladled out. The wind gusted frequently, crying forlornly and cloaking me in a swirling mist of snow that coated my face and sent trickles of ice water down my neck.

I shoveled for over an hour, then gave it up. I stood in the hole, my back, shoulders, and knees aching so much I was afraid to move. The wind-driven snow blew across the cemetery like a glacial fog, and I wondered what the hell I was going to do, for I didn't think I had the strength to cover the goddamn grave back up. I figured I was perhaps four and a half feet down. And graves were what? I've always heard six feet, and I just didn't have the emotional grit to keep going. Groaning, I squatted down in Esther's grave to get out of the chilling wind and tried to think.

When my knees started screaming, I jabbed the shovel into the bottom of the hole and used the handle to pull myself upright. The shovel sounded different. I jabbed the shovel down again and the sound was hollow. I knelt down and scooped sand with my hands.

My light shone on a dull wood surface. I smiled the smile of the re-

prieved. Another twenty minutes' grubbing about in the bottom of the hole and the top half of Esther's coffin was once again exposed to air.

Lillian and Darleen obviously hadn't splurged on the coffin, either.

I was too tired, too sore, for careful prising. I jammed the wide, flat end of the pick into the seam, pushed back and forward. Wood splintered, then gave way. I stuck my head out of the grave and looked toward the road. One lone car drove swiftly by. I waited another minute or so, then straddled the coffin, grabbed the lid, and pulled.

Cracking and splintering, the lid reluctantly opened. Streams of sand and snow flowed into the coffin. I shielded the light with my hand and squatted down. Esther's skull, scantily wrapped in stiff ribbons of desiccated flesh and surrounded by a wispy nest of silver hair, grinned up at me. I had a sudden image of the thousands of skeletons lying in their coffins, their skulls grinning up at the utter darkness. I scrolled the light down Esther's bones. Strings of muscle and tendon fluttered against stained bone, and various things, once living, rustled in the cold night air. As the light passed below her rib cage, red, green, and blue orbs, sunk in moldering flesh, glowed with a deep splendor. I pulled my mittens off with my teeth and picked up the stones. Eleven of them, a large handful. Carefully I put them in the inside pocket of the parka and zipped it shut. As I

stood, my light caught something else. I squatted back down and, from just under the jawbone, picked up a four inch long piece of polished black marble with a rounded end. As the wind and snow whipped over my head, I stared at the thing; then I put it in with the stones, made sure the pocket was secure, and straddled Esther's grave.

Getting the coffin closed was tougher than getting it open. Finally I just slammed the lid shut. It wasn't tight, but it was as good as it was going to get. I climbed out of the grave, stretched, and picked up the shovel.

As the advertisement says . . .

"Just do it." Mindlessly, I shoveled, ignoring the aches . . . the cold . . . the pain. "Just do it." It was a hell of a lot of sand coming out, and putting it back wasn't any easier. Every so often I stopped shoveling and stamped the sand down. Then, as if I were putting a puzzle together, I arranged the chunks of frozen earth on the grave and shoveled snow over the mess. The wind and snow would smooth it all out. When spring came, the incessant rain and mud would level Esther's grave, and it should soon appear as untouched as before I desecrated it.

Let us hope.

My legs and arms heavy as lead, my back a solid river of pain, I stumbled through the woods to the van. Cat, from deep in the blankets, gave me a sleepy meow, patted my cold hand with her bad paw, yawned, and laid her head back down.

I made it back to The Farm just as it was getting light. I parked the

van, got Cat in the sling, and took the pick and shovel back to the tool room. Then I staggered across the pasture to the boat.

After stoking the fire, I fed Cat, who was now wide awake and ready for action, and took a hot shower. After the shower I spent twenty minutes stretching, then poured myself a mug of Lancers—the breakfast of grave robbers. Slumped on the settee, I sipped the Lancers and arranged the stones in a line in front of the mug. No cheap stones these. They glowed like living things and had a weight that couldn't be physically measured. I drank and toyed with them, rolling them along the table and watching the morning light dance in their souls. Then I lined them up again, took three aspirin with a final drink of Lancers, stumbled into the forward cabin, and fell into bed.

I woke at one in the afternoon. Although I didn't remember picking her up, Cat was curled in a ball on the pillow beside my head. I shuffled around for several minutes, stretching and yawning. I got a pot of coffee brewing, dumped little brown pellets into Cat's bowl, then did twenty minutes of long, slow stretches to try to relieve some of the stiffness and pain. After stretching, I poured a mug of coffee, sat on the settee, and took three aspirin with the first sip. It wasn't until I'd almost finished the coffee that I realized the stones weren't on the table.

I stared dumbly at the bare tabletop for several moments, then slowly turned and looked at Cat.

She glanced at me and went back to nuzzling the little brown pellets. I sighed, slid off the seat, and, groaning out loud, got down on my hands and knees. I found a ruby wedged under the bathroom door and an emerald on the bottom shelf of my bookcase. Another ruby was jammed between a crack in the floorboards. It took thirty minutes of crawling around the cabin floor to retrieve the eleven stones.

Cat thought it was splendid that I'd decided to come down and play.

I pushed open the door to Gretchen's around three. I walked to the counter, stood just behind Betty Worthen, and ordered a bowl of haddock chowder from Gretchen, who smiled and said, "I knew you couldn't resist. Now you're gonna find out why them royal types would have jumped into the moat."

I smiled back, touched Betty on the shoulder, and said, "Why don't you join me in a booth?"

She turned and looked up at me. Her little piggy eyes narrowed. She muttered, "Uh-oh," grabbed her ham and egg sandwich, and stood. I led us to the last booth, dropped Cat on the table, and sat down. Betty got settled, put her cap on the table just so, and squinted at me.

"You're up to something. You look tired and you're moving a little funny and your face is kinda red and windburned and you're going to screw up my day, aren't you?"

"Would you like to hear about a drug ring run by senior citizens?"

She gazed at me a moment. "Sure."

"How about a murder?"

"By the same people?"

I nodded.

Betty sighed. Gretchen put a breadbowl in front of me and marched back to her stoves. The chowder was steaming and bubbling and smelled sublime. Cat lay down with her chin on the edge of the plate, pressed the pad of her bad paw against the bottom of the bowl, and started to purr. "Okay, Harry," Betty said. "Spin me a tale."

Between spoonfuls of chowder I did.

I left out the part about spending four hours behind the couch.

I didn't mention the stones.

Betty picked up the pestle and rolled it around on the palm of her hand. "So you make a couple of visits to that house, one a B and E, decide that something isn't kosher, and go dig up Esther Jenkins' grave?"

I nodded at the pestle. "Get all four of them together. Confront them. I'm fairly sure they'll start talking."

"If you think I'm going to let them think that *I* dug up Esther's grave, you are sadly mistaken. We cops need things like probable cause, warrants, good stuff like that. Even your basic righteous citizen just can't go off and start flailing away with a shovel. Jesus Christ, Harry, *grave robbing? Breaking and entering?*"

Cat sat up, dug her good paw into the top of the bowl, and pulled off a chunk of bread. Her eyes big and very bright, she looked up at me and meowed loudly. To keep her from diving into the bowl, I spooned out a chunk of haddock and put it

on the table. She slapped it with a paw, took it in her mouth and shook it, then settled down and began eating. Betty stopped fiddling with her cap, put it back just so on the table, and picked up the pestle. After several minutes of silence she muttered, "The assistant D.A., Dolly Groz, and I are pretty tight. I recently did her a major favor, saving her serious embarrassment, probably a reprimand. Let me chat her up."

"I don't want to end up on a chain gang, Betty."

She grinned. "Naw, most that will happen is Dolly will get pissed and you'll do three to five in Concord." She scratched Cat behind her ears and grinned at me again. "I'll take care of the furry, gimped-up princess while you're gone."

At ten o'clock the next morning I watched Darleen park the minivan on the street and go into Lillian's house. I waited a few minutes, then got out of the van and walked the half block to the house. I knocked hard three times and walked in. Darleen, Lillian, and Charlie were clustered around the dresser, which was next to the couch. All three drawers were on the floor. The cats were side by side in the middle of the sofa. When I came in, they jumped off the sofa, came over to me, and rubbed against my ankles. The sisters and Charlie stared open-mouthed at me; then Charlie slowly stood and said, "Just what the hell do you think you're doing? Don't you believe in being invited?"

I raised my hands. "I thought I'd drop in and see what the going rate

for Prozac is. I've been a bit depressed lately."

After a short, dark silence, Darleen stood and waved a finger at me. "We told you, we don't know what happened to those damn stones and we don't know where they are. Now, please leave."

Hands in pockets, I leaned against the big television. I didn't say anything, just gave them the famous Harry Neal Significant Look. It seemed to puzzle them more than anything else, so I nodded at the dresser. "I'm afraid your customers will have to go back to Rite Aid and Shop 'n Save. As of now you're out of the prescription drug business."

Charlie stuck out his chest. "Neal, you would be well advised to keep your nose out of our business. If you're smart, you'll get in your car and go back to that farm, and stay there."

"I don't think so, Charlie. Dispensing drugs is dangerous business, even for legal professionals. Selling the stuff to anyone with money is stupid. Look what you did to Esther."

"What do you mean?" Lillian asked.

"Esther was sick—congestive heart failure, hypertension, perhaps a few other maladies. It's my guess you people started medicating her. Giving her stuff from your own pharmacy in addition to what her doctor prescribed. That's why she was often confused. You over-medicated her."

"We did everything we could for Esther," Lillian said. "We waited on her hand and foot. How dare you

suggest that we were responsible for her confusion! How dare you!"

They all glared at me. I did my best to glare back but was outnumbered, so I went to the glass cabinet, opened the door, and took a black marble mortar off the third shelf. "You did more than that."

They watched me as I held out the mortar. Their eyes flicked from me to the mortar and back. I pulled the pestle out of my pocket and put it in the mortar. It was obvious that they were a perfect match.

The silence was absolute. Lillian and Darleen looked stunned. Charlie looked puzzled. Darleen, her flaccid face pale, her lips trembling, stared at the mortar and pestle, put a hand to her face, and whispered, "Oh my God. Oh no, oh God."

Lillian seemed to deflate, to collapse in on herself. Staring at the mortar and pestle, her eyes filled with an infinite sadness, she started sobbing and shaking her head. Charlie put a hand on her shoulder and said, "Lillian, what's the matter, dear? What is it?"

Lillian, still shaking her head, folded her hands and stepped away from Charlie's touch. Darleen suddenly cried, "Charlie, we have to kill him. We must kill him. If we don't, we're all going to prison until we die."

"What? *Kill him? Kill him!*" Charlie babbled. "What the hell are you yammering about? Lillian! What's going on?"

Lillian, her hands clasped tightly, her head hanging down, sobbed and shook her head. Darleen yelled, "*We have to kill him! Now!*" With a frantic look she pulled away

from Charlie and moved toward me. "Come on, Charlie, we can do it. We can do it now. We have to. We can't go to prison. I don't want to die in prison."

Still holding the mortar and pestle, I stepped back toward the door, getting ready to bolt if Charlie decided killing me was the thing to do. The cats ran out of the room.

As I edged toward the door, noises came from the kitchen. The kitchen door slammed, and Betty Worthen, followed by a handsome young woman dressed in a tailored black pinstriped suit, walked into the living room. Betty smiled at me. She gave Lillian, Darleen, and Charlie her cop look. She reached down, opened one of the little boxes, and removed a handful of small plastic envelopes. She let them dribble from her hand to the rug. "It's time to pay the piper, guys."

Dolly Groz took the mortar and pestle from my hand and held out her other hand. I removed the little recorder from my pocket and handed it to her. "Okay, Mr. Neal, go home and stay there. Officer Worthen will give you a call later today."

I nodded, gave everyone a feeble smile, and left. When I climbed into the van and started it, a small meow came from the depths of the quilt on the seat beside me. I put a hand inside, rubbed a little furry ear, and got a lick on my thumb. Then I put the van in gear and headed back to The Farm.

As I turned onto The Farm's drive, Mildred Bedee's yellow 1987 Chevy station wagon slowly lumbered by. Mildred was driving, which was very unusual. She'd had

an accident a few months ago, and she hadn't driven since. In the passenger seat was Hannah March. They both looked grim.

I got the van parked, and with Cat in the sling, I went to the dining hall, took one of the two cordless phones The Farm had, made myself a turkey sandwich, and headed for The Barnyard. It was dark and empty. I turned on a couple of lights and got a fire going in the big fireplace. Then I poured myself a glass of wine, put three dollars in the box and Cat on the floor. I picked through a stack of magazines piled on a small table in the corner, then sat down at the table nearest the fireplace.

Three hours later I still had the place to myself. A postcard-perfect fire was blazing in the fireplace, and Cat was in front of it, pressed against the warm bricks with all four paws in the air. I was reading an article in *Nature* about the origins of life. The phone chirped. I picked it up, pressed a button, and said, "Are you aware that about fifty percent of the DNA in your cells is interchangeable with the DNA in the cells of a banana?"

There was a pause, then Betty said, "Why don't you meet Dolly and me at Gretchen's tomorrow around ten."

"How much trouble am I in? Perhaps I'd be wiser to head for Arizona and live with the Apaches."

"Ten o'clock, Harry. The town will pop for your coffee."

At ten after ten the next morning I was sitting at the counter drink-



ing coffee and talking to Gretchen, who was holding Cat against her bony chest and feeding her small bits of boiled chicken. Betty and Dolly Groz came up behind me. Betty ordered coffee, and Dolly ordered decaf with one sugar. Dolly was impeccable in a deep gray silk pants suit, a small gray derby, and snakeskin boots.

Betty tapped me on the shoulder and nodded at the booths. I retrieved Cat, and we marched to the last booth. I sat across from Betty and Dolly, put Cat on the table, and said, "Are the gods smiling on me or should I have gone to Arizona to live with the Apaches?"

Betty smirked. Dolly dumped sugar into her coffee and stirred. Cat limped over to Dolly, stuck her nose in the steam coming out of the cup, and purred. She sat, put a paw on the saucer, and looked up at Dolly. Dolly stared at Cat a moment, then picked her up, laid her against her shoulder, and gently kneaded the muscle on Cat's scarred shoulders. "Betty told me about this one. You should have named her Lucky."

I smiled and said, "I think she knows how lucky she was, and is. Her motto seems to be *Carp Diem*."

Dolly smiled. She put Cat down, ran a finger over her left eyebrow, looked me in the eye, and said, "We took them down to the station, read them their rights, and asked them if they wanted a lawyer. They hemmed and hawed and finally said maybe later. The only person they called was the other sister. We had quite a chat with the Gang of Four before that Hannah showed up. Actually, it's the Gang of Three

now. While waiting in line at the movie theater the other night, Grover had a minor stroke. He's still in the hospital, and the doc I talked to said that even though the stroke was minor it's his third or fourth one and he's definitely on the short list. Anyway . . . they've been dealing prescription drugs for a little over three and a half years. Got started because among the four of them they were shelling out almost nine hundred a month to Rite Aid and the pharmacy at Shop 'n Save. So they started making trips to Canada. That knocked almost four hundred off their pill bill. Then Lillian bought a computer, and they started searching the Net. They found sites where they could buy prescription drugs cheap-cheap. We confiscated some of the original packages. They're from places like South Africa, Thailand, Hong Kong. Lillian says they arrive in pretty battered shape.

"Anyway, friends started asking them to buy their drugs in Canada for them. And, they gave them a little commission for doing so. Six months later they're printing their own prescription pads and forging the names of fourteen different doctors from seven different towns and clinics. They'd go up to Montreal, hit several different pharmacies, and come home the next day. They found out fast that customs doesn't much care what four old people are up to. If they could get a drug cheaper over the Net, then that's the way they'd go. They had thirty-eight people they were schlepping prescription drugs to."

Dolly sipped her coffee, set it

down, and sighed. Cat put her nose over Dolly's cup, found it had cooled sufficiently, dipped her head, and took a few licks. Then she sat by the napkin holder and began cleaning herself. Dolly looked at Cat, looked at her coffee, and with her forefinger pushed the cup to the center of the table. "They were not only selling but prescribing. They'd bought some pharmaceutical books, and when someone asked if they had anything for a headache or high blood pressure or whatever, they'd recommend a drug or two and sell it to them."

"Esther, too," I muttered.

"Esther, too. They were giving her all kinds of crap, trying to make her well. I chatted up the pharmacist over at Shop 'n Save. He was amazed. Said the combination they were feeding Esther would turn anyone's mind to gruel."

"And after they induced her dementia, they killed her."

She nodded. "Lillian and Darleen were trying to feed her her noon meal. She was agitated, spitting food at them, throwing things, and accusing them of stealing her things. Then she started screaming, really screaming—at the top of her lungs. It scared them. Darleen tried to get her to shut up by putting her hand over her mouth. Esther took a chunk out of the hand and kept screaming. Darleen, now in bigtime pain, with blood streaming from her hand, lost it. They ordinarily used the mortar and pestle to grind up Esther's pills and mix them with applesauce or ice cream. Darleen grabbed the pestle and jammed it into Esther's

mouth. Naturally, Esther quit screaming. But now the pestle's slippery with Darleen's blood and Esther's drool. They couldn't get it out of her throat, and she choked to death.

"After the panic wore off a bit, they tried for the pestle again. No go. So they used a spoon to shove it farther down her throat, got her mouth closed, cleaned things up, and called Betty. They told Charlie that she'd probably had a heart attack. After he listened to the sisters tell us the tale, he looked like he was going to stroke out."

Dolly pulled her coffee back to her. "I talked to Nathaniel Beblois, Esther's mortician. He doesn't remember anything unusual. When I showed him the pestle, he said he was a mortician, not a forensic pathologist. He makes my skin crawl; just for the hell of it, I'm gonna do a background on him. Anyway, Lillian and Darleen blabbed away for an hour or so. Charlie was in shock and didn't say a hell of a lot. Then that other sister, Hannah, waltzes in. When she got the gist of what was going down, she went ballistic. Twenty minutes later Loretta DuTemple, The Lawyer from Hell, was reaming Chief Morin and me new orifices.

"They're all back home. We closed down their little drug business and told them we'd be paying them visits from time to time. And we're going to send out a form letter to all their customers. They won't be buying any more blackmarket drugs." She sipped her coffee and rubbed a finger over her eyebrow and stared

at me. "That's going to be the extent of it."

I leaned on the table with both forearms and gazed at Dolly. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Betty fiddling with her cap. She seemed to be staring at the floor. "They killed Esther. Darleen wanted to kill me," I said.

"Yep. Man Two for doing Esther. But I had a chat with their doctors. As I said, Grover Brunt is on the short list. He's not going to be above ground much longer. Darleen Brunt is hypertensive and diabetic. She has the beginnings of renal failure, and a surgeon is going to have to chop a few of her toes off in a year or so. Lillian Shea is also diabetic, also hypertensive, and is going to need bypass surgery within the year. Charlie Shea isn't too bad, but he's seventy-seven, lived here and ran a garage here all his life, and people like him. Darleen is seventy-six. Lillian's seventy-four. We take those people before a jury, with their age and infirmities? With the way people feel about the cost of their drugs? Loretta DuTemple would paint us black and ugly . . . bigtime ugly."

She gave me a malignant smile. "And she'd put you on the stand and let you tell the jury how you broke into their house. And how you went out one fine night and dug up Esther's grave and desecrated her corpse to get that pestle. That'd go over really big with a jury of their peers."

Still staring at me, she leaned forward. "None of that's going to happen. We did some plea bargaining. Actually, we dropped the whole god-

damn mess. It's over. Now I'm going to go back to the courthouse and get Eric Sessler three years for slapping his ex-wife around, Betty's going back on patrol, and you—and you, Mr. Neal, are going to go about your business, perhaps play some checkers with the other old souls out at that farm. And the next time you do a little B and E, or dig up an old lady's grave, I'm going to bronze your testicles and use them for paperweights."

They slid out of the booth. Groz gave a gentle pull on Cat's tail and headed for the door. Betty put a hand on my shoulder, squeezed, and followed Groz.

With Cat under my arm, I walked into The Barnyard. It was fairly busy. Some kind of championship game was on television, and a cluster of men gripping beer bottles were gathered at the near end of the bar. I went to the other end, bought a glass of wine from Florence, drank half of it and had her top it off. I gave her two dollars and headed for the table by the fireplace. I put Cat on the bricks in front of the fireplace, sat across from Mildred and Hannah, gave them a smarmy smile, and said, "Good evening, ladies. May I say you're looking quite sour and grim this fine night."

Mildred smiled faintly and shook her head. Hannah sniffed, took a deep breath, and in a raspy whisper said, "I ask . . . no, I hire you to find out what happened to Esther's precious stones, and what do you do? You almost get my sisters hauled into court and our good name plas-

tered all over the news. Why, if it weren't for that dear Miss DuTemple, Lillian and Darleen would have been subjected to untold harassment and humiliation."

I took a long drink of my wine. "They killed your sister. They killed Esther."

"An accident, a horrible accident. They will have to live with that until they die. That is certainly punishment enough. To think . . . to think that the whole town almost heard, well, I just thank God for Loretta DuTemple."

"You owe me another five hundred dollars for expenses."

Hannah's eyes bulged. She grabbed her purse with both hands and clutched it to her heaving bosom. Mildred put a hand over mine and said, "Harry, I really don't think that you're entitled to more money. After all, the objective was to find out what happened to Esther's precious stones. But what happened, what you caused, was something else entirely. Esther's death was obviously a misadventure. And Hannah is right, her sisters will have to live with that the rest of their lives. Asking for more money is a bit much under the circumstances."

"As I said yesterday, I have doubts that the stones are all Hannah's. It seems to me they belong to the estate."

"My sisters have gotten all they deserve from Esther's estate. I was her favorite sister. I have no doubt she would have given them to me had she lived."

I gave her my famous look of disdain, reached into my pants pocket, pulled out a Ziploc bag, and put

it on the table. Even wrapped in plastic, the stones glowed in the firelight like living things. Like inquisitive birds, Hannah and Mildred leaned forward and gazed at the bag and its contents. Finally Mildred picked it up and carefully slid the stones out of the bag onto the table. Hannah's arm slithered across the table. With one hand she fed the stones into the other hand and put them back in the Ziploc bag and dropped the bag into her purse. She stared into my eyes for a time, then whispered, "How? . . . Where?"

"That morning, your sisters were after her again about the stones. I don't really know, but I assume they were rather harsh about it. At any rate, Esther—confused and without recourse—did the only thing she could think of. She swallowed them. And a bit later your sisters killed her."

Their silence was absolute. I could feel their eyes on me and stared steadfastly at the fireplace. I lifted my glass and let the wine trickle into my mouth. Hannah dug around in the purse for several moments and finally drew out a large black wallet. She pulled bills out of the wallet and held out her hand.

"I'm certainly not going to give you another five hundred dollars. Two hundred will have to suffice. Despite the fact that you managed to recover my jewels, you've done a lot of damage. Consider yourself lucky."

I took the bills and stuffed them in my pocket. "Actually, Hannah, knowing you as I do, this was about what I expected."

Hannah struggled to her feet, patted Mildred's shoulder, and walked out of The Barnyard.

Mildred and I watched the flickering flames and drank our wine. When our glasses were empty, she stood, put a hand on my shoulder, and said, "The next time someone asks me for a favor, I'll fail to mention your name."

"That would be nice," I said.

The trip across the pasture was another tough one. The temperature was well below zero, and I was

underdressed for the trek. After getting the boat warmed up and Cat fed and tended to, I slumped in the settee with a mug of Lancers and listened to the wind.

Cat struggled up her little staircase, meowed, put a paw on my chest, and meowed again. I snuggled her against my chest and held her until she dozed off. Then I eased her onto my lap, reached into my pocket, and pulled out two emeralds.

They lay on the table, glowing like the weary eyes of a bitter god.

**Important Notice to Subscribers:** Please direct all change of address or other subscription inquiries to P.O. Box 54011, Boulder, CO 80322-4011. For change of address, please advise six to eight weeks before moving. Please send us your current mailing label and new address.

**For Back Issues:** Send your check for \$5.00 (U.S. funds) to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Suite 100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Please specify the issue you are ordering. Add \$2.00 per copy for delivery outside the U.S.

# UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the May issue.*

Although influenza wasn't directly responsible for the death at JFK International Airport, it was a contributing factor. The flu epidemic sweeping New York this holiday season left Customs only half staffed. As a result, lines were long and tempers were short as those departing worried about making their homeward-bound plane connections on time.

Each of the ten couples foremost in the fatal line came from a different state; one was from South Dakota. One couple were the Darnells; the Grangers another. One man was named Jason, and one wife was named Greta. Each husband followed a different profession; one was a salesman.

(1) No husband's first and last names shared the same initial. The man returning from Venezuela stood three places behind the artist and three places ahead of Della's husband. They included Abner, Bart, and Charles. None was first or last in line.

(2) The man from Ohio was two places behind Mr. Jenkins and four places ahead of Dan. They included the mechanic, the tailor, and the optometrist.

(3) Earl stood three places behind the man from Pennsylvania and two places ahead of Mr. Adams. They were married to Alice, Bertha, and Elvira (in some order).

(4) Charles was two places behind the man returning from Nairobi and three places ahead of Mr. Baker. They were headed home to Minnesota, North Carolina, and Ohio (in some order).

(5) Elvira's husband was just behind the man who'd visited Queensland and three places ahead of the banker. Their last names included Adams, Baker, and Colbert. Elvira was three places behind the artist.

(6) Alice was two places behind the woman from Virginia and four places ahead of Mrs. Eakins. They were returning from Monaco, Nairobi,



bi, and Oman (in some order). None was first in line. Mrs. Eakins was neither Ida nor the wife of the florist.

(7) The contractor stood just behind Mr. Adams and just in front of Ian. In another part of the line, the realtor was just behind the man returning from Tahiti and just in front of Brad.

(8) The man from Rhode Island stood three places behind Henry and two places ahead of the mechanic. Another three men included the one from North Carolina, the dentist three places ahead of him, and the man returning from Spain, who was three places behind him.

(9) Frank was two places behind Clara's husband and three places ahead of the man from Utah.

(10) Flora (who was neither George's wife nor the woman returning from Monaco) was just behind Mrs. Inman and just ahead of Mrs. Fletcher.

(11) The optometrist was just behind the man from Tennessee and just ahead of Helen's husband.

(12) Mr. Hawkins stood somewhere behind the man from Texas and three places ahead of Janice's husband. The couple who had visited Uruguay stood immediately behind the couple who had visited Palestine.

Suddenly a fight erupted! The man who was returning from Romania was fatally struck by the man just behind him. The police arrived almost immediately and arrested the assailant, who was charged with manslaughter.

*Who killed whom while waiting to clear Customs?*

---

See page 110 for the solution to the March puzzle.

FICTION

# The Faultless Painter

Michelle Knowlden



---

*Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,  
Or what's a heaven for?*

“Andrea del Sarto:  
The Faultless Painter”  
Robert Browning

**A**t the end of the hall a thin light shimmered. The three of us flanked Aunt Helena while Philip looked for the light switch. A chill hung in the air. When something creaked above us, Gregory ducked behind my cousin Robyn.

“Is this where the ghost appears?” Helena demanded of our guide.

Philip gave her a stern look. “Madam, there are no ghosts at King’s Place.”

Only one capital “P” place existed in Southern California’s Inland County: that was King’s Place, Galleries and Gardens, at the foot of the San Bernadino Mountains. Forty years ago, the moneyed and royalty congregated here; twenty five years ago, the elite still coveted invitations to tea. Then Henry King died—some said from heart disease, some said from grief. In the fifteen years since his death, the buildings and grounds had declined. Last year, in an effort to raise money, the famous camellia garden, acres of lily ponds, and an art gallery in the main building were opened to the public.

“Don’t give me that, young man,” Helena said. The pom-poms on her purple beret vibrated. “Everyone knows that Melody King haunts the halls here.”

Without answering, the sixty-something Philip flicked a switch and flooded the landing with light. It did little to dispel the shadows and gloom. The shimmer winked out. I squinted, but it was useless. Beset with a virulent case of Egyptian ophthalmia, my sight had blurred to seeing only muddled gray.

I shouldn’t complain. Before this, I’d been abed with ebola. Life with an alphabetical immune disorder is fraught with difficulties.

We’d been granted special access to the family’s private holdings as a favor to Robyn’s thesis advisor, a noted scholar. Armed with pamphlets about the Kings and a video about ghosts in Southern California, Aunt Helena arrived at the estate ready for the hunt.

Although we called her “aunt,” Helena was not a blood relative. My uncle had left his nieces and nephews a good income that suited my chronic ill health. That he had also left his wife Helena and an entailed trust requiring gainful employment were annoying, but the latter was easily solved.

After all, murder investigations in my small hometown of Wildemark, Wisconsin, should have been light work. If my cases had turned out to be more plentiful and far-flung than expected, the solutions invariably proved to be simple.

Robyn cleared her throat. "Philip, I don't need to continue the tour. Point me in the right direction, and I'll get to work on those manuscripts."

"There's time for that later," Helena said. "Show us the ghosts immediately, Philip."

"If you will follow me." Philip moved slowly down the hall with Helena thumping after him, her lavender tea dress swishing and the pom-poms on her beret bouncing. Gregory, her assistant and sometime poet protégé, glanced longingly down the stairs, then hurried to her side.

Shaking her pale blonde hair, Robyn caught my arm before I could follow.

"Micky, clear up something for me. We are here at the estate's request to authenticate letters containing references to Coventry Patmore, right? No one said anything about ghost hunting, did they?"

"Let's see," I said. I numbered our objectives with my fingers. "The lawyer's vague remarks about insuring the correspondence with LaMare and Cardex's largest client made Gary LaMare salivate. That was *his* mission for us. Aunt Helena's mission lies in hope of disturbing the dead. Gregory's here because he loves his free room above Aunt's garage, and so puts up with the minor inconveniences of her murders and mayhem. I'm here—" At this point I heaved a sigh. "I'm here because the murder detection business is slow in Wildemark, Wisconsin, and because with my recent vision problems, I didn't see her coming. Also, Helena does control Uncle's trust. As Browning said, 'so fettered fast we are.'"

"That's what I thought," she said glumly. "Let's hope a ghost shows up quickly so we can move on."

At the end of the hall Philip led us into a dark room where an electric fire leaked a meager light. I was the last person to enter and stopped near the door. A mottled mirror hung there, and I peered into its depths trying to see follicular hypertrophy on my eyelids. In the reflection I saw the dim outline of Helena, Gregory, and Philip standing near an overstuffed chair while Robyn lingered next to me at the doorway.

"This was Anton Cabot's sitting room," Philip intoned. "As you are probably aware, Henry King was the artist's patron for over thirty years. From 1952 till his death in 1988, Master Cabot lived in the main house and occupied this floor."

"Does *his* ghost walk the halls, too?" Helena asked.

Philip sniffed. "No, madam, it does not. His living presence brought much prestige to King's Place. Born in 1920, Anton Cabot was the only son of an old Boston family that fell on difficult times in the thirties. The artist as a young man was handsome, dashing, and the darling of New York. He dabbled in art as a youth but contributed to the war effort by painting phosphorous on clock dials in World War II. Unfortunately, as happened to many of the phosphorous painters who chewed their brushes, his lips ulcerated from the radioactive paint and marred his good looks."

I blinked, and thought I saw the thin shimmer of light again reflected

in the mirror. Fingering the tube of erythromycin eye ointment in my pocket, I peered closer at the images in the cold glass.

"Anton Cabot withdrew from society and focused on his work. Soon he gained a reputation as a gifted artist. Many of the wealthiest families in America and in Europe clamored to own his portraits. Although he'd grown a beard to hide his mouth, he still avoided the crowds who sought him out. It was quite a coup for Henry King to engage the artist to paint his young family. King made his money in steel during the war. His foundry in Norwalk was the third largest in the state. His was new money, and he coveted the society of the American aristocracy. When Anton Cabot joined his household, Henry King was finally welcome in the ranks of the well-to-do."

Robyn leaned forward to see why I was squinting at the mirror. Startled, she spun around to stare at the mantel above the fireplace.

"What . . ." her voice trailed off.

The rest of us turned to stare, and what was a thin sliver of murky light in the mirror now appeared to be a glowing figure hovering in midair. Gregory shrieked and bolted past me. I heard him race down the stairs, and a moment later the front door slammed.

Helena raised her fist. "Depart, spirit. Go to the rest ordained for you. Seek not the halls of the living, but look for . . ."

Robyn muttered something, stalked to the window, and flung open the heavy drapes. Strong summer light drenched the room. Blinking in the glare, I saw the hovering ghost resolve itself into a painting hung over the fireplace.

With lips twitching, Philip gestured to the portrait. "Madam, may I introduce you to Melody King, the former mistress of King's Place?"

Helena threw her shoulders back and fixed him with a frosty look. "I am not amused, Philip. You will continue the tour in the family's quarters."

While the others headed downstairs, I stepped closer to the painting. I heard Helena's heavy footsteps accompanied by Philip's uneven stride recede into the library on the main floor. Robyn hesitated at the door. "Coming, Micky?"

"I see why they called him The Faultless Painter," I said. Robyn joined me.

"It is perfect, isn't it? He was another Andrea del Sarto."

Cabot had reinvented realism in a style that caught the imagination while it unnerved. Caught the imagination because the faces and figures had such texture and life that one was amazed they'd sprung from oils and brush. Unnerved because the pictures revealed almost too much.

"What's she staring at?" Robyn asked, and shifted uneasily next to me.

"The painter, one would suppose," I said. Shadowed with uncertainty, Melody King's amber eyes stared straight at the viewer. It was a picture of youth although she must have been over thirty when Anton Cabot

came to King's Place. She stood lithe and wary at the threshold of a gated garden. Although she was hatless, her hand rested on her blonde tresses as if trying to remember where she'd left it. The other hand clutched the iron door handle, and her posture suggested retreat. Strangely enough, the path to the gate seemed well tended, but the garden itself was a tangle of wild roses and brambles. I noted the faint outline of a long, narrow footprint in the corner of the garden.

"Why does it glow in the dark?" Robyn asked irritably.

"Phosphor in the paint," I said. "He's outlined her dress and hair with it."

Helena shouted my name, and then Robyn's. I pulled the drape back, and the figure again gleamed weirdly in the dark. But it was just a painting. No spirit haunted the sitting room; nothing lingered except the smell of pipe smoke and old carpets.

Philip waited in Henry King's library with an air of well-bred patience. Helena openly snooped in the bookshelves, her gloved hands testing for dust, then peering down vases, then jiggling the doors of locked cupboards. With a crow of delight, Robyn swooped down on a cardboard box with her name stenciled on it. Clutching it to her, she asked, "These are the letters? May I look at them now?"

Philip unbent at her enthusiasm and smiled. "Of course, Miss Cardex. Mrs. King's study was through that door. Perhaps you would care to examine the materials in there? The light is better."

He'd scarcely finished speaking when Robyn shot through the door hugging the box to her. Helena lifted a corner of the worn Oriental carpet. "Philip, does the house have any trapdoors or secret compartments?"

"No, madam, it doesn't."

"Then, where did they hide the gold?"

"Gold, Mrs. Cardex?"

"She means the gold that Henry Junior dug up in the Rockies," I offered.

"Young Henry did not have the opportunity to gather much gold. He died shortly after moving to Colorado."

"Is that him standing behind his mother?" I asked. A massive family portrait hung above another fireplace on the only wall free of bookcases. Another Cabot: only he painted with such methodical truth-telling.

The seated woman, the only female of the group, was an older version of the Melody King gleaming in the sitting room above us. She still had the same wary look about her, but this time she looked off to one side, lips curled in distaste. Faint worldliness evident in her composed hands, the naivete that sparkled in the girl at the garden gate had been replaced with a veneer of toughness.

The older man standing next to her clasped her shoulder with thick fingers. His craggy face was stiff with the lord-of-the-manor expression. His fine clothes hung awkwardly on his large frame, and his other hand fidgeted with his weskit button. Like his wife in the earlier painting, his dark eyes looked directly forward, although his gaze was not of suspicion



but satisfaction. "Mr. and Mrs. King, of course," Philip said. "And their three sons: Henry Junior, Richard, and Edward. Painted shortly before the deaths of the two eldest sons."

"Quite an age difference between the boys," I said. The youngest child could not have been more than nine.

"Only a year between the heir and Richard," Helena put in. "And they died within a year of each other, isn't that right, Philip? Both just nineteen years old. The eldest drove off a cliff; then the middle one committed suicide in Paris."

Philip shut his eyes in annoyance. Sympathetically, I rubbed my own eyeballs, grainy with trachoma, and jiggled the bottle of tetracycline in my other pocket.

"Henry Junior's death was due to a car accident," Philip said. "He took risks, was a daredevil of sorts. No one was surprised he'd drive too fast on a winding mountain road." His gaze passed from one restless boy to the next.

"Master Richard fell in with the wrong crowd while studying art in Paris. He died of a drug overdose at a party. Not an uncommon death for young people in the sixties."

I wondered that Henry King would put this family portrait in a place of honor, for it certainly hadn't honored its subjects. Unstinting with the truth or his brush, Cabot had bared all the pretensions of the parents and all the edgy posturing of the two older boys. Had King been so insensible of the insult to his family? Only his youngest son was spared. The faultless painter had mirrored the boy's likeness to his mother, and recaptured the innocence in the child that the mother had lost between the two portraits. Drooping eyelids and rosy cheeks gave the boy an angelic look.

"Undoubtedly the fault was due to the rearing of the boys," Aunt Helena said. "The times are always fraught with danger and temptation, but good character will triumph."

"Aunt Helena, of course, has no children of her own," I murmured.

"Of course," Philip murmured back.

She looked at us with asperity. "I've had oversight of my late husband's eight nieces and nephews for the past seventeen years. While one or two must be brought to the sticking point often," she fixed me with a stern look, "all are of passable character. At least none is dead, in prison, or on drugs."

I opened my mouth. "Illegal drugs," she amended. I shut my mouth.

"Was this portrait painted upstairs, Philip?" I asked.

He nodded. "Anton Cabot used his sitting room as a studio for the family pictures. The drapes and carpets have changed since then."

"The two landscapes behind the Kings? I didn't see them upstairs."

Philip frowned. "I don't recognize the paintings. Cabot wasn't the sort to have other artists' works in his quarters, and he didn't do landscapes. Or cityscapes. The picture on the left is Paris, isn't it? Interesting that he should depart from reality for a wall hanging. See the arm of the chair?

I nicked it when I moved it into the sitting room, and he put that chip in exactly."

"Interesting indeed that he should then change the background paintings."

"I don't find it at all interesting," Helena said. "Philip, do the spirits of Henry Junior and Edward walk the halls here?"

"I understand young Henry rests in peace. I've heard nothing otherwise. On the other hand, Edward does walk the halls here."

Helena's eyes lit up.

"Edward's the youngest son, Aunt," I said. "He's not dead."

Helena scowled.

"Most of the paintings are in the main gallery, Mrs. Cardex. There is only one other painting of note in the family's quarters, and that's across the hall here."

She sniffed, and marched out of the room. "Fine, then. Let's see it."

As Philip reached for the light switch, I stayed his hand. "Who is that?" I asked, and pointed to a small portrait near Henry King's massive desk.

"That," he said, "is the artist himself. Anton Cabot."

I studied the portrait. Cabot had as ruthlessly painted himself as he had the others. With one exception. In the picture, the narrow man looked sideways into a mirror where his damaged lips were hidden by a flaw in the glass. I checked the year of the painting and calculated that he would have been fifty-four. At twenty he might have been the darling of New York society, but here his hooded eyes cut flesh to bare hidden truths.

"Did you know him?" I asked.

Philip didn't answer. I turned to face him, and though scar tissue crept across my corneas, I saw sorrow in his eyes.

"Philip?"

"Yes, I knew him. I knew all of them." He flicked off the light switch and walked heavily into the hall without looking back. In the darkness I saw the phosphor glow outline the figures of the two dead sons and their mother, and light the gray eyes of the living one. In the portrait of the artist, a trail of phosphor gleamed on his fingers.

"And who is this?" Aunt Helena asked. She stood before an immense portrait of a young man dressed in a United States Army uniform. The portrait stood in the hallway just before the entrance to the dining room. I recognized the sitting room again, but this time the walls and floors were stripped bare.

"Mr. King's brother James," Philip said. He gave it an indifferent look. "Cabot painted it from a photo while the brother was in Korea."

"Seems decent," Helena allowed. I agreed with her. The planes of his face were etched with integrity. Medals and ribbons decorated his uniform. He stood awkwardly, but in his eyes I read steadfast honor.

"No ghosts here," Helena said. "I've time before tea to examine the lily ponds. There are reports that one can see the face of Melody King in their depths. Michaela?"

"Yes, Aunt?"

"Find Gregory and have him join me. His poetic eye may see something that science has missed. Good day, Philip."

"Good day, Mrs. Cardex." From the marbled steps, we watched Helena stalk down the vast expanse of lawn to the lily ponds. Behind us I could see Robyn's silhouette in Melody King's morning room as she bent over stacks of paper.

"Shall I assist you in finding Mrs. Cardex's secretary, miss?"

"Thanks, Philip, but I know exactly where Gregory is. He'll have found the tea house, and is undoubtedly sipping a cup in a romantic corner. Gregory has an eye for his comforts."

"Then shall we deliver your aunt's message there?"

"Heavens no." I grinned. "She's fine slogging down there by herself. I have an eye for comforts, too. Care to join me?"

He didn't hesitate. A short time later we were sipping a mellow Chinese blend in a small tea room near the main gallery. Gregory thought himself invisible, but I saw him behind the palm tree near the unmanned harp. The room smelled of smoky tea leaves and of the camellias on every table.

"You are Micky Cardex the detective, are you not?" Philip asked. "The one who solved the Rostanovich murder a few years ago? I recognized you from that news show."

"Hmm. That case had all the scandal, blood, and intrigue the media treasures. The murders I usually investigate are more subtle."

Our hostess refilled Philip's cup, then mine. While he poured milk into his tea, I snapped open my compact and checked my eyes for bilateral lacrimation. Still nothing.

"Subtle murders like young Henry's and Richard's," I continued, and put the compact away.

Philip's hand froze, and he carefully put the creamer down. "Murders?"

"Isn't that why I'm here, sir? Rather ingenious luring Helena here with ghosts and Robyn with letters from the Victorian poet who just happens to be the subject of her thesis. Of course, promising the insurance contract to our client might have brought my partner Gary here instead of me. Except that he's vacationing in Idaho with his parents as he does every year at this time. Rather a complicated way of getting me here. Did you think of requesting my services in the usual manner?"

"I did," Philip said and gave me an exasperated look. "But your secretary said you had something wrong with your eyes."

"That's true. I have Egyptian ophthalmia, which you catch from contaminated linens. I was infected by some Egyptian cotton towels my aunt gave me."

He studied me critically. "Your eyes look fine to me."

"That's the heartbreak of it," I agreed. "But I'm here now, and you want to discuss your nephews."

Another nonplussed look. "Nephews?"

I sighed. "Mr. King, we could hurry this along quicker if you wouldn't repeat everything I say. I recognized you from the painting, of course. You still move like a soldier, and I assume the Purple Heart was for the injury to your foot. You favor it when you walk. Also, the hostess is too deferential for you to be a mere docent." I sipped my tea. "I congratulate you on your performance. Have much theater experience?"

"Not since college." He leaned back in his chair, and one eyebrow raised sardonically. "Okay, Miss Cardex, maybe the reports about you weren't exaggerated."

"Call me Micky. Only the press calls me Miss Cardex."

"All right, Micky. My name is James Philip King, but call me Phil. Now tell me about my nephews. I was in Boston working on my business degree when they died, but something smelled bad about the whole thing. My brother Harry was twenty years older than I, but after their deaths you would have thought him fifty years older. He sort of withered. He told me having Cabot at the house was his only comfort."

"He found no comfort in his wife and youngest son?"

James King shook his head. "No. Mel avoided Cabot, which offended Harry. And Edward? Well, he was too much like his mother to suit my brother. The kid was mousy and too eager to be liked. Put Harry's teeth on edge. Cabot spent more time with Ed than his own father did."

"Melody King was killed, too."

He gave me a startled look. "Sorry, you're wrong about that. She started drinking after the boys died. Used to get so blind drunk . . . One night she fell into one of the lily ponds and drowned in eighteen inches of water. They found her body the next morning. It was five years after Richard's death. To the day."

"She had to die, Phil. She was going to tell her husband. She'd had five years to let it fester, and protecting Edward wasn't reason enough to remain silent."

He half stood, then lurched as his bad foot set wrong. Slowly he sat down. "You're crazy if you think Ed could have killed his brothers. He was only ten years old when they died."

"No, the boy wasn't the murderer. Mrs. King kept silent because Edward wasn't her husband's son. Edward was Anton Cabot's son."

"What?"

At his exclamation the hostess started towards our table. King waved her off. Gregory shrank farther behind the palm.

"What do you mean, Ed's Cabot's son?" he gritted. "Are you crazy?"

"Simple genetics. Edward and the artist had the same hooded eyelids. Lucky that in every other way, the child resembled his mother. As Anton

kept his face hidden, no one probably noticed that his eyes drooped like Edward's. Check his portrait. He told the truth there."

"But Mel hated Cabot."

"There was probably good reason for her hate. The painting in the sitting room showed her being forced against her will."

"Why didn't she say something to Harry?"

"Not to speak ill of your brother, but would he have listened?"

After a moment he blinked. "You're right. Harry liked having the attention that being Cabot's patron brought him. In some ways he liked Cabot better than his family."

"That's too harsh, Phil. You did say that his sons' deaths nearly destroyed him. He was blind to the painter's danger. He never saw how Cabot seduced Henry Junior into a love of risk. He undoubtedly urged your nephew to look for gold in the Rockies. Probably painted a romantic picture while encouraging him to hazard his life at every opportunity. Did Cabot set up the accident that took his life? We may never know. But since his style was methodical, I doubt he left it to chance. The same with Richard. It would have been difficult for the boy to resist the celebrity, especially one so admired by his father. And the man who introduced him to paint and canvas probably introduced him to drugs long before he went to Paris."

"You're saying he planned their deaths?"

"You saw it yourself. The two landscapes behind the older boys in the family portrait. The Rockies behind young Henry. Paris behind Richard. Painted a year before their deaths."

"Good God."

I nodded.

"Melody King was in a terrible position. To stop Cabot, she would have to betray Edward. The painter probably blackmailed her by threatening to reveal her youngest son's true lineage. Also Melody may have suspected that she wouldn't have been believed, either about the rape or the boys' deaths. Henry Senior's regard for the artist went too deep. That he kept the painter's portrait next to his desk was telling."

Philip swallowed.

"In the end, she intended to do the right thing," I said. "She probably tried the easier way out by telling Cabot that if he didn't leave she would reveal the truth. Unfortunately, the painter wasn't willing to give up the comforts of King's Place or access to his son. No one would suspect that her death was anything but a drunken misstep in the dark."

"Can you be absolutely sure it wasn't? That any of their deaths weren't accidents?"

I nodded. "He was a faultless painter. Those he killed, he outlined in phosphorous. In his paintings he always told the truth. He wanted the child who had his eyes to own King's Place."

I leaned back in my chair. "You know the painter made sure his son in-

herited the estate and not you? His painting of you showed a room stripped of everything."

Philip straightened in his chair, and he gave me a soldier's look. "If what you say is true, then I'll make sure Edward won't own it any longer. Harry never changed his will after Henry Junior and Richard died. Harry left it to those with King blood: his sons, then me. Ed's nearly squandered what my brother built, but that stops now. Cabot won't win this time."

"How will you prove that Edward's not a King?" I asked.

He smiled humorlessly. "There's always a blood test, but I doubt I'll need it. I could show Ed his father's eyes, but Cabot probably told him the truth after Mel died. Ed's still a mouse, so I'll scare the bastard away." His eyes had a predatory gleam.

"I'll leave you to it, then." I blinked painfully. "Revenge may not satisfy, but it does fill the time."

I stood. "I need to put some ointment on my tear ducts. I'll retrieve Gregory if you would explain to Robyn and Aunt Helena why our work here is finished."

He gave me a sheepish look. "I'd rather not, if you don't mind. Your aunt scares me."

"I'm glad you're not perfect, Phil. A man without faults makes me suspicious."

## **SOLUTION TO THE MARCH "UNSOLVED":**

Flora Umbolt stabbed George Tuttle

| FLOOR | COUPLE                  | FROM         | ARRIVED   |
|-------|-------------------------|--------------|-----------|
| 10    | Edgar & Gilda Quimby    | Jacksonville | Wednesday |
| 9     | Bert & Cindy Orwell     | New Orleans  | Saturday  |
| 8     |                         |              |           |
| 7     | George & Alice Tuttle   | Indianapolis | Tuesday   |
| 6     | Andrew & Flora Umbolt   | Moline       | Sunday    |
| 5     | Donald & Belinda Randle | Kansas City  | Friday    |
| 4     |                         |              |           |
| 3     | Frank & Eloise Parsons  | Helena       | Monday    |
| 2     | Claude & Doris Stanley  | Laredo       | Thursday  |



FICTION



# Battleground

John M. Floyd

**“D**o you think he knows?” Jenny asked.

Twenty feet away, Drew Pennebaker stood with his hands in his pockets, staring out over the barren landscape. After a moment he turned, took a Sprite from the cooler they’d brought along, and sat down beside her on a shelf of rock. He rolled the cold can between his palms, his eyes on the eastern sky. Within the last five minutes it had gone from a dull pink to a hard, brilliant orange. The sun was up; it wouldn’t be long now.

“No,” he said. “I think he suspects something—he’s no fool. But I don’t think he knows.” Drew popped open the can and took a long swallow, then leaned back against the still-cold rock behind them. “If he did, he wouldn’t have invited us along.”

“I guess you’re right,” Jenny said. “Maybe it’s just my nerves.” She sighed and shifted position, her brown eyes studying the surroundings.

What a godforsaken place, she thought. A moonscape of crags and canyons and scorpions, a vast nothing in the middle of nowhere. Not a tree or a plant or a single speck of green as far as the eye could see. A hundred yards from the open area where they sat a deep ravine twisted snakelike through the sand and rubble. A boulder the size of a schoolbus spanned the gap and offered the only visible access to the jagged line of mountains several miles to the east.

It was there, she remembered, gazing across at the rocky slopes,

that Willard was headed. He had told her about it two days ago. Go with me, he had said. It’ll do you good to get away from the hotel. I’ll ask Drew to come along, too. . . .

As it turned out, Willard had been here once already, years ago, long before he’d taken over the company. He’d dabbled a bit in archaeology even then, and in the ugly sawtoothed mountains to the east he’d made several finds—nothing significant, but enough to whet his interest. He had described them to her in detail, a faraway look in his eyes. This was at last a chance, he said, to do some further exploring there. All he really wanted to accomplish was to relocate the sites and make some rough sketches for a followup expedition.

Both Jenny and Drew had agreed, and the more she thought about it, the better it sounded. Willard’s business meetings would be over soon, and they’d be heading back to the States. This might be her last chance to see more of Africa and take some good slides for home.

And to be with Drew.

Yesterday afternoon Willard had informed them of the plans. The three of them would all drive out in Drew’s Jeep—a hardtopped, air-conditioned Wrangler. It was only a few hours’ trip across the desert. Jenny and Drew could wait in the hills near the Jeep while Willard did some scouting around, and they’d all get back to civilization before the heat went off the scale. How did that sound?

Both of them shrugged. Why not? It made no real difference to them.

It was only later that night, in the hotel lounge long after Willard was asleep, that the first shadow of an idea entered their heads. . . .

The sun was well above the horizon now. Jenny shivered despite the rising temperature and tucked her legs underneath her on the rock.

"Where'd Willard go?" she said. "If he's using the john someplace, he's taking a long time of it."

Drew Pennebaker took another swig of his Sprite, then tipped his head to the left, toward the quarter-mile maze of slabs and boulders they had crossed on foot twenty minutes ago. Their Jeep was parked on the other side, out of sight from here. "He went back to the Jeep. Said he'd forgotten his backpack."

"What?" She grabbed his arm, her eyes wide. Part of his drink sloshed out onto the sand. "What if he does know about us, Drew? What if you're wrong? He could take the Jeep right now and leave us here—"

"Calm down. He's not going anywhere." Drew's left hand, which had slipped into his pocket, came out again. The silver keychain glittered in the early rays of the sun.

"Nobody outsmarts me, Jenny—not even Willard. If I'm wrong, as you say, and he is onto us . . ." He shrugged. "Then it's war. Between us and him. And in a battle of wits, my dear—" Drew smiled and jingled the keys "—he's no match for me."

She swallowed and nodded, easing her grip on his arm. Then she

stiffened again. "Here he comes," she whispered.

Drew turned to follow her gaze.

At fifty-six, Willard Martin was twenty years older than Jenny and Drew. He was a ruggedly handsome man whose square jaw and close-cut gray hair made him look like a short Lee Marvin. His arms and legs were tanned a deep walnut from the sun, and years of outdoor hobbies had lined and weathered his face like a sailor's. It was an image of which he was oddly proud. Walking toward them now, in a faded cotton shirt and Bermudas, the very last thing he resembled was what he actually was—the chairman and CEO of one of the largest mining conglomerates in the world.

And that was only one of Willard's accomplishments. He was also a gourmet cook, a concert pianist, and the author of three books on amateur archaeology.

In addition to that, he was Drew's boss.

And Jenny's husband.

"Hello, darling," she said, forcing a smile. "I was beginning to worry about you."

Willard stopped several feet away, his chest heaving. "Had to fetch my pack. I'd left it in the back seat." He hitched the old backpack higher on his shoulders, sat down on the cooler, and began to unlace his hiking boots. "How're you two doing so far?"

Jenny shrugged. "Fine. It's really not as warm as I thought it would be."

Willard chuckled. "That's because it's seven in the morning," he

said, massaging his toes. "Remember what I told you yesterday? In four hours it'll hit one hundred twenty. By early afternoon . . ." He shook his head. "But we'll be back at the hotel by that time. Sipping daiquiris by the pool."

"I could use one now," Drew muttered, staring at the sun. His Sprite can sat empty and forgotten on the stone beside him.

Willard grinned. "You'll be okay. Just keep your hats on, both of you, and drink plenty of water. Snap a few pictures if you get bored." He finished relacing his boots and stood up, taking a short pickaxe from its resting place against a boulder. His own camera lay where he'd left it earlier, in a leather case beside his binoculars on the rock slab next to Jenny's leg. He bent to retrieve them, pulling the camera-case strap over his shoulder, and gave his wife a peck on the cheek. She smiled and squeezed his hand.

"Be careful," she said.

He looked about him for a moment, taking stock. "I won't be more than two or three hours." To Drew he said, "Make sure she's comfortable, okay?" Drew nodded, and without further ado Willard turned and strode away from the sandy clearing, his eyes fixed on the ridge that bisected the rugged line of hills to the east.

Silently they watched him go. It was only after he had reached the ravine and crossed its natural bridge that Jenny spoke.

"What do you think?" she asked.

Drew glanced at her, then checked his watch. It was seven ten. "Half an hour. No longer." He

raised his head again, resuming his vigil. Willard was already making his way up the slopes.

After a moment Drew turned once more to face Jenny. She looked at him. He was smiling.

"How about a game of gin?" he said.

Halfway up the ridge, Willard Martin lay motionless on a red shelf of rock, watching the two figures in the distance. His binoculars were Bushnell 10 x 50's; he could see every move they made.

They were sitting facing each other, Drew on the benchlike stone where Jenny had been earlier and she on a towel spread out on the sand. Between them was the cooler, and they appeared to be playing cards on its top. As he watched, Willard saw Drew check the time and take a long look in his direction before resuming the game.

Willard pulled himself up onto his elbows and lowered the glasses. Leaning to his left, he unslung the camera case from his right shoulder and set it down on the rock beside him.

The leather case was expensive and well-worn. Besides the camera, it contained a separate compartment for batteries and extra lenses and a pouch for spare film. Willard kept his eyes on the scene below him as he unzipped the pouch, reached inside, and removed a flat black object from below the rolls of film.

It was a tape recorder, a miniature Panasonic he had bought a week ago in Johannesburg. It used a forty-five minute microcassette;

the tape inside was still moving. He switched it off, rewound it to the halfway point, and pressed PLAY.

A snatch of conversation. His wife's voice. Good: at least the machine was working.

He hit REWIND again, waited a few seconds, and started it up once more. This time there was only silence. That made sense; when he had first planted the recorder and headed back toward the Jeep, Drew Pennebaker was alone in the clearing, a tattered map of Africa open in his hands. Jenny's gear had been lying on an outcrop of rock nearby, next to Willard's own, so that's where Willard had decided to place the camera case and recorder. The slab of rock actually resembled a bench and was the natural choice of a place to rest; he had felt sure that when his wife returned from Nature's call she would sit there. It was a chance he'd had to take.

Once again Willard raised the binoculars. Nothing had changed. Jenny was dealing another hand. For a full five minutes he lay there in the sun, watching them, listening to the empty hiss of the tape.

He prayed he wouldn't hear what he expected to hear. There was still time to go back.

It was getting hotter. His elbows, propped on the rock, began to throb. A drop of perspiration ran into his eye; he blinked and wiped his forehead with a shirtsleeve. Ten feet away, a lizard as thick as his forearm scurried underneath a stone.

When the recorder finally spoke, it was so sudden Willard almost dropped the glasses.

"Well," Drew's voice said, "it's almost time." A short pause. Willard spun the volume all the way up. "Any regrets?" Drew asked.

Willard heard his wife's voice next. It was much louder and clearer than Drew's. Evidently she had, as Willard had hoped, sat next to the camera case. "None," she answered. "How about you?"

A long sigh whooshed out of the recorder. "Only one. Only that we didn't do something like this sooner."

There was no sound for several seconds. Then Jenny's voice: "Look at it this way, sweetie. He's worth even more now than he was last month. Or last week."

"Like gold," Drew said.

"That's right." She laughed then, a throaty chuckle that Willard had once loved. For an instant his composure broke. He squeezed his eyes shut and swallowed, clenching his teeth till they hurt. Then she spoke again, and the moment passed. He opened his eyes and stared at the recorder. "It won't damage your ego, will it," she was saying, "to have a lady support you after we're married?"

"A lady? Who did you have in mind?"

She must have pinched or prodded Drew then because the recorder issued a sharp male grunt, followed by playful laughter. Willard listened in stony silence.

He wondered what Mrs. Pennebaker, who was also an employee of the company, would say if she heard this.

Minutes passed. The tape ran quietly on. Below him the card



game continued. Willard Martin watched and listened.

Soon his hair was soaking wet. He took off his hat with his free hand and fanned himself with it. The binoculars never left his eyes.

He wondered how long they would wait.

"Drew?" the recorder said.

"What."

Willard heard her sigh. "There's no way this can . . . backfire, is there?"

"Not a chance," Drew said. "All he'll take with him besides maps and sketchpads, he told me, is some digging gear and a few books and magnifying glasses in case he stumbles onto something. And one canteen of water." A short silence, then the clink of aluminum cans, and the *ka-choo* of one being opened. "Here," he said.

"Thanks."

After a moment Drew's voice continued: "I figure we should stay here for a while after he leaves, give him at least enough time to get over that ridge—" There was a pause here, and Willard could imagine both of them turning to look into the distance. "—and then we take off. We walk back to the Jeep and get out of here for good. In this heat he won't last till night-fall."

Jenny must have hesitated, then said, "What about later? When they find . . . the body?"

Drew chuckled. "They won't. That's the beauty of it. Nobody knows exactly where we went—not even his pilot, according to what Willard said to you yesterday. We'll tell the police we all went north,

toward the Ngana plateau. You and I got separated from him, searched for him frantically, and finally had to go for help. They'll look for him there, not here. And it's roughly the same distance from town, in case anyone decides to check the mileage on the Jeep." He paused. "If the body is found at all, Jen, it'll probably be a hundred years from now by someone like him, digging for bones."

Willard lowered the glasses. That was it, he said to himself. He'd heard enough. All they'd needed was the opportunity; when it presented itself, they had taken advantage of it.

It was logical. He'd been suspicious of them for months, and ninety percent certain for weeks. Now he knew for sure.

He had had to be sure.

"Drew?"

The tape recorder startled him. Willard had almost forgotten about it, now.

Drew's answer was unintelligible. He must have moved away for a moment, or had his back to the recorder.

"About us . . ." Jenny said.

After a moment, the reply, barely audible: "What about us?"

"Do you think he knows?" she asked.

Silence.

Once again Willard heard the clinking of cans, the rumble of ice. Then Drew spoke, and his voice this time was clear. He had moved, apparently, to Jenny's side. "No," he said. "I think he suspects something—he's no fool. But I don't think he knows." There was a sharp



fizz as another can was opened. "If he did, he wouldn't have invited us along."

"I guess you're right. Maybe it's just my nerves."

Another silence followed, broken only by the whisper of the tape. Below, in the clearing, Jenny Martin was shuffling the cards. Drew looked at his wristwatch. Willard put down the binoculars long enough to do the same. It was seven thirty-six.

The tape played on. Willard heard his wife ask where he was, heard the alarm in her voice after Drew told her Willard had returned to the Jeep for his backpack. Little had she known, Willard said to himself, that he couldn't have done what she feared; not then. He hadn't been certain about them then.

Peering through the glasses, he saw Drew put down his cards and rise to his feet, his eyes on the ridge above Willard's perch. The man couldn't see much from that angle, Willard knew: the sun was in his eyes. Apparently satisfied, Drew glanced again at his watch. His mouth moved soundlessly as he spoke. Jenny nodded in response and rose from her seat. Together, wasting no time, they began to collect their gear.

Willard continued to watch them, absorbed in their actions, only half listening now to the recorder. Suddenly something Drew had just said caught his attention. Willard rewound the tape for a second or two and played it back again.

"—it's war," Drew was saying. "Between us and him. And in a battle of wits, my dear—" Willard

heard the jingle of keys "—he's no match for me."

Willard lowered the binoculars. For the first time that day, the first time during his long, hot vigil, he felt a grim satisfaction.

With half his mind he heard Jenny tell Drew that Willard was approaching, and a moment later his own voice, answering his wife's question. "Had to fetch my pack," he heard himself say. "I'd left it in the back se—"

Willard switched off the recorder. He rose stiffly to his feet and removed the tape from the machine. He no longer felt any remorse. He stared at the cassette for a long moment, then tossed it away into the rocks. By noon the heat would melt it to jelly.

He raised the glasses one last time. The man and woman on the other side of the ravine had finished gathering their things. They were walking quickly away toward the west. Toward the Jeep, which was parked and waiting a quarter of a mile away.

Willard was impressed. It had been a well-planned, well-executed operation.

They were leaving him to die.

He put the recorder in his pocket, replaced the binoculars, and swung the camera case over his shoulder. Adjusting his backpack, he turned and continued up the rocky slope.

It was a quarter till eight.

The pilot touched a tongue to the point of the yellow pencil and printed in the six letters C-Y-G-N-E-T-A baby swan. There was only one

more to go, down in the bottom corner. Sixty-three across: a four letter word for "Spanish pot." And wouldn't you know, it was one of those where all the intersecting words were poetic terms or foreign contractions or mythological names.

The pilot struggled with it for five more minutes, then flung the folded newspaper aside. Damn waste of time. For that matter, this whole trip was probably a waste of time. What a place this was . . .

Chris, the pilot, had been reared on a hundred acre ranch two hours from Albuquerque and had always had the opinion that the ugliest scenery on the face of the earth lay within the boundaries of that home county. That opinion was wrong as it turned out. What was visible now through the tinted glass of the parked helicopter was enough to make the New Mexico badlands look like the Boca Raton Country Club.

And there seemed to be no end to it. It stretched away forever to the right and left, a brownish-yellow sea of stone and sand and emptiness. Behind the chopper a row of sawtoothed mountains marched like giant camels across the western horizon. Ahead, twenty yards from the windshield, was the landmark—a huge pillar of stone, two hundred feet tall, easy to spot from the air. The chopper had circled it once and landed in its shadow.

The instructions were simple: remain here alone, beside the pillar, until twelve sharp. If there was no contact before that time, leave for town, following the same roundabout flight path.

The pilot checked the clock on the instrument panel. Ten fifty-five.

The heat, even here in the retreating shade of the pillar, was oppressive. Chris had just remembered the bottle of Jack Daniel's and was rummaging for it under the seat—one little nip wouldn't do any harm—when someone spoke.

"Olla," the voice said.

Chris's head whipped around.

Willard Martin stood framed in the passenger doorway, a weary smile on his face. His cheeks and forehead were grimy, his eyes red, his clothes soaked with sweat. "Sixty-three across," he said, pointing to the puzzle on the seat. "A Spanish pot is an 'olla.' If you're interested."

Chris let out a lungful of air. "You look like you've been in a war."

"Well, a battle, at least," Willard said, a faraway look in his eyes. Then his face cleared, and he climbed inside. "Help me off with this thing, will you?"

Obediently the pilot took the backpack as Willard shrugged free of the straps. Like its owner, the pack was covered with a film of dirt and sand. The loose buckles were too hot to touch. As Chris upended it to toss it into the storage area behind the seats, two items were visible in the open pouch. One was a clear plastic toolkit, the kind you might carry in your trunk for emergencies.

The other was a little less common.

Chris stared at it a moment, then glanced at Willard, whose attention was elsewhere. He had found the bourbon and was swilling it from the bottle.

Chris hoisted the pack the rest of the way into the storage bin and faced front. Willard was leaning back in his seat now, eyes shut against the glare of the sun. Streaks of perspiration cut vertical scars through the layers of dirt on his face. The bottle, its level sharply altered, lay cradled in the crook of his arm. He looked like a drunk in a Bowery alley.

"Willard?"

Slowly he opened his eyes.

"Is it true?" Chris asked.

An even deeper weariness seemed to tug at Willard's face. "It's true."

Chris pondered that for a moment. "So what happened?"

"What happened," Willard said, "is they think I'm dead."

"And what about them?"

Willard turned to face the pilot. "They're together now."

The statement seemed to echo in the quiet of the cockpit. For a while neither of them said a word.

"Any regrets?" Willard asked, still studying Chris's face.

"Not a one."

Willard nodded, then turned again to stare straight ahead. Moments later, under Chris's steady

hand, the chopper rose through a cloud of swirling sand, banked around the stone landmark, dipped its nose, and headed south. After a mile or two Chris glanced again at Willard, who was half asleep already, his head bobbing lazily with the movements of the aircraft.

And as the pilot watched Willard's profile, a shaft of sunlight caught one of the buckles on the backpack behind the passenger seat, turning Chris's thoughts again to the strange object inside it.

Willard was something, all right. He was one of those people who could always find a way to solve a problem, whether it involved ancient history or corporate mergers or crossword puzzles.

And what a solution.

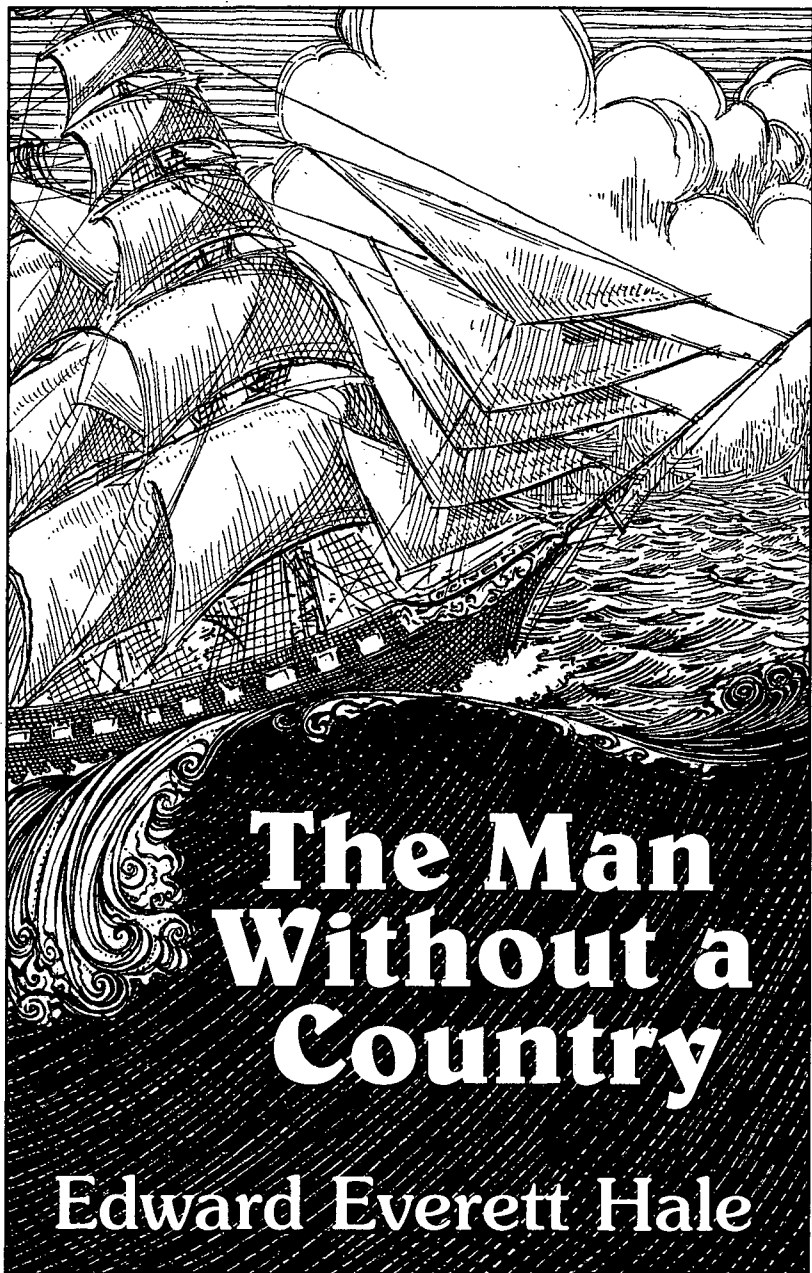
Chris Pennebaker broke into a slow smile.

A distributor cap. Of all things, an electrical distributor cap, with the coil and sparkplug wires still attached. In fact, it looked like one Chris had seen several times herself, back home in Johannesburg. Behind her home, actually. In her garage.

Under the hood of her husband's Jeep.

**Note to Our Readers:** If you have difficulty finding Alfred Hitchcock's *Mystery Magazine* at your preferred retailer, we want to help. First, let the store manager know that you want the store to carry this magazine. Then send us a letter or postcard mentioning AHMM and giving us the full name and address of the store. Write to us at: Dell Magazines, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220.

MYSTERY CLASSIC



# The Man Without a Country

Edward Everett Hale

*Illustration by Tatjana Mai-Wyss*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 4/02*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I suppose that very few casual readers of the New York *Herald* of August 13, 1863, observed in an obscure corner among the Deaths, the announcement: "NOLAN. Died, on board U. S. Corvette *Levant*, Lat. 2° 11' S., Long. 131° W., on the 11th of May, PHILIP NOLAN."

I happened to observe it because I was stranded at the old Mission House in Mackinaw waiting for a Lake Superior steamer which did not choose to come and I was devouring to the very stubble all the current literature I could get hold of, even down to the deaths and marriages in the *Herald*. My memory for names and people is good, and the reader will see as he goes on that I had reason enough to remember Philip Nolan. There are hundreds of readers who would have paused at that announcement if the officer of the *Levant* who reported it had chosen to make it thus: "Died, May 11, THE MAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY." For it was as "the man without a country" that poor Philip Nolan had generally been known by the officers who had him in charge during some fifty years, as, indeed, by all the men who sailed under them. I daresay there is many a man who has taken wine with him once a fortnight, in a three years' cruise who never knew that his name was Nolan or whether the poor wretch had any name at all.

There can now be no possible harm in telling this poor creature's story. Reason enough there has been till now, ever since Madison's administration went out in 1817, for very strict secrecy, the secrecy of honor itself, among the gentlemen of the navy who have had Nolan in successive charge. And certainly it speaks well for the esprit de corps of the profession and the personal honor of its members that to the press this man's story has been wholly unknown—and I think to the country at large also. I have reason to think, from some investigations I made in the Naval Archives when I was attached to the Bureau of Construction, that every official report relating to him was burned when Ross burned the public buildings at Washington. One of the Tuckers, or possibly one of the Watsons, had Nolan in charge at the end of the war, and when, on returning from his cruise, he reported at Washington to one of the Crowninshields—who was in the Navy Department when he came home—he found that the department ignored the whole business. Whether they really knew nothing about it, or whether it was a *non mi ricordo*, determined on as a piece of policy, I do not know. But this I do know, that since 1817, and possibly before, no naval officer has mentioned Nolan in his report of a cruise.

But as I say, there is no need for secrecy any longer. And now the poor creature is dead, it seems to me worthwhile to tell a little of his story, by way of showing young Americans of today what it is to be A Man Without a Country.

Philip Nolan was as fine a young officer as there was in the Legion of

the West, as the Western division of our army was then called. When Aaron Burr made his first dashing expedition down to New Orleans in 1805, at Fort Massac or somewhere above on the river, he met, as the Devil would have it, this gay, dashing, bright young fellow, at some dinner party, I think. Burr marked him, talked to him, walked with him, took him a day or two's voyage in his flatboat, and, in short, fascinated him. For the next year barrack life was very tame to poor Nolan. He occasionally availed himself of the permission the great man had given him to write to him. Long, high-worded, stilted letters the poor boy wrote and rewrote and copied. But never a line did he have in reply from the gay deceiver. The other boys in the garrison sneered at him because he sacrificed in this unrequited affection for a politician the time which they devoted to Monongahela, hazard, and high-low-jack. Bourbon, euchre, and poker were still unknown. But one day Nolan had his revenge. This time Burr came down the river not as an attorney seeking a place for his office but as a disguised conqueror. He had defeated I know not how many district attorneys; he had dined at I know not how many public dinners; he had been heralded in I know not how many Weekly Arguses, and it was rumored that he had an army behind him and an empire before him. It was a great day—his arrival—to poor Nolan. Burr had not been at the fort an hour before he sent for him. That evening he asked Nolan to take him out in his skiff, to show him a canebrake or a cottonwood tree as he said—really to seduce him—and by the time the sail was over, Nolan was enlisted body and soul. From that time, though he did not yet know it, he lived as “a man without a country.”

What Burr meant to do I know no more than you, dear reader. It is none of our business just now. Only, when the grand catastrophe came, and Jefferson and the House of Virginia of that day undertook to break on the wheel all the possible Clarences of the then House of York, by the great treason trial at Richmond, some of the lesser fry in that distant Mississippi Valley, which was farther from us than Puget's Sound is today, introduced the like novelty on their provincial stage and, to while away the monotony of the summer at Fort Adams, got up, for spectacles, a string of courts-martial on the officers there. One and another of the colonels and majors were tried and, to fill out the list, little Nolan, against whom, Heaven knows, there was evidence enough—that he was sick of the service, had been willing to be false to it, and would have obeyed any order to march any-whither with anyone who would follow him had the order been signed, “By command of His Exc. A. Burr.”

The courts dragged on. The big flies escaped—rightly for all I know. Nolan was proved guilty enough, as I say, yet you and I would never have heard of him, reader, but that, when the president of the court asked him at the close whether he wished to say anything to show that he had always been faithful to the United States, he cried out, in a fit of frenzy,



"Damn the United States! I wish I may never hear of the United States again!"

I suppose he did not know how the words shocked old Colonel Morgan, who was holding the court. Half the officers who sat in it had served through the Revolution, and their lives, not to say their necks, had been risked for the very idea which he so cavalierly cursed in his madness. He on his part had grown up in the West of those days, in the midst of "Spanish plot," "Orleans plot," and all the rest. He had been educated on a plantation where the finest company was a Spanish officer or a French merchant from Orleans. His education, such as it was, had been perfected in commercial expeditions to Vera Cruz, and I think he told me his father once hired an Englishman to be a private tutor for a winter on the plantation. He had spent half his youth with an older brother hunting horses in Texas, and in a word, to him "United States" was scarcely a reality. Yet he had been fed by "United States" for all the years since he had been in the army. He had sworn on his faith as a Christian to be true to "United States." It was "United States" which gave him the uniform he wore and the sword by his side. Nay, my poor Nolan, it was only because "United States" had picked you out first as one of her own confidential men of honor that "A. Burr" cared for you a straw more than for the flatboat men who sailed his ark for him. I do not excuse Nolan; I only explain to the reader why he damned his country and wished he might never hear her name again.

He never did hear her name but once again. From that moment, September 23, 1807, till the day he died, May 11, 1863, he never heard her name again. For that half century and more he was a man without a country.

Old Morgan, as I said, was terribly shocked. If Nolan had compared George Washington to Benedict Arnold or had cried, "God save King George," Morgan would not have felt worse. He called the court into his private room and returned in fifteen minutes, with a face like a sheet, to say, "Prisoner, hear the sentence of the Court! The Court decides, subject to the approval of the president, that you never hear the name of the United States again."

Nolan laughed. But nobody else laughed. Old Morgan was too solemn, and the whole room was hushed dead as night for a minute. Even Nolan lost his swagger in a moment. Then Morgan added, "Mr. Marshal, take the prisoner to Orleans in an armed boat and deliver him to the naval commander there."

The marshal gave his orders, and the prisoner was taken out of court.

"Mr. Marshal," continued old Morgan, "see that no one mentions the United States to the prisoner. Mr. Marshal, make my respects to Lieutenant Mitchell at Orleans and request him to order that no one shall mention the United States to the prisoner while he is on board ship. You

will receive your written orders from the officer on duty here this evening. The court is adjourned without delay."

I have always supposed that Colonel Morgan himself took the proceedings of the court to Washington city, and explained them to Mr. Jefferson. Certain it is that the president approved them—certain, that is, if I may believe the men who say they have seen his signature. Before the *Nautilus* got round from New Orleans to the northern Atlantic coast with the prisoner on board, the sentence had been approved and he was a man without a country.

The plan then adopted was substantially the same which was necessarily followed ever after. Perhaps it was suggested by the necessity of sending him by water from Fort Adams and Orleans. The Secretary of the Navy—it must have been the first Crowninshield, though he is a man I do not remember—was requested to put Nolan on board a government vessel bound on a long cruise and to direct that he should be only so far confined there as to make it certain that he never saw or heard of the country. We had few long cruises then, and the navy was very much out of favor; and as almost all of this story is traditional, as I have explained, I do not know certainly what his first cruise was.

But the commander to whom he was entrusted—perhaps it was Tingey or Shaw, though I think it was one of the younger men; we are all old enough now—regulated the etiquette and the precautions of the affair, and according to his scheme they were carried out, I suppose, till Nolan died.

When I was second officer of the *Intrepid*, some thirty years after, I saw the original paper of instructions. I have been sorry ever since that I did not copy the whole of it. It ran, however, much in this way:

WASHINGTON (*with a date which must have been late in 1807*)

Sir—You will receive from Lieutenant Neale the person of Philip Nolan, late a lieutenant in the United States Army.

This person on his trial by court-martial expressed, with an oath, the wish that he might "never hear of the United States again."

The Court sentenced him to have his wish fulfilled.

For the present, the execution of the order is entrusted by the president to this department.

You will take the prisoner on board your ship and keep him there with such precautions as shall prevent his escape.

You will provide him with such quarters, rations, and clothing as would be proper for an officer of his late rank if he were a passenger on your vessel on the business of his Government.

The gentlemen on board will make any arrangements agreeable to themselves regarding his society. He is to be exposed to no indignity of any kind nor is he ever unnecessarily to be reminded that he is a prisoner.

But under no circumstances is he ever to hear of his country or to see any information regarding it, and you will especially caution all the officers under your command to take care, that in the various indulgences which may be granted, this rule, in which his punishment is involved, shall not be broken.

It is the intention of the government that he shall never again see the country which he has disowned. Before the end of your cruise you will receive orders which will give effect to this intention.

Respectfully yours,

W. Southard, for the Secretary of the Navy.

If I had only preserved the whole of this paper, there would be no break in the beginning of my sketch of this story. For Captain Shaw, if it were he, handed it to his successor in the charge, and he to his, and I suppose the commander of the *Levant* has it today as his authority for keeping this man in this mild custody.

The rule adopted on board the ships on which I have met "the man without a country" was, I think, transmitted from the beginning. No mess liked to have him permanently because his presence cut off all talk of home or of the prospect of return, of politics or letters, of peace or of war—cut off more than half the talk the men liked to have at sea. But it was always thought too hard that he should never meet the rest of us except to touch hats, and we finally sank into one system. He was not permitted to talk with the men unless an officer was by. With officers he had unrestrained intercourse, as far as they and he chose. But he grew shy, though he had favorites: I was one.

Then the captain always asked him to dinner on Monday. Every mess in succession took up the invitation in its turn. According to the size of the ship, you had him at your mess more or less often at dinner. His breakfast he ate in his own stateroom—he always had a stateroom—which was where a sentinel or somebody on the watch could see the door. And whatever else he ate or drank, he ate or drank alone. Sometimes, when the marines or sailors had any special jollification, they were permitted to invite Plain-Buttons as they called him. Then Nolan was sent with some officer, and the men were forbidden to speak of home while he was there. I believe the theory was that the sight of his punishment did them good. They called him Plain-Buttons because, while he always chose to wear a regulation army uniform, he was not permitted to wear the army button for the reason that it bore either the initials or the insignia of the country he had disowned.

I remember, soon after I joined the navy, I was on shore with some of the older officers from our ship and from the *Brandywine*, which we had met at Alexandria. We had leave to make a party and go up to Cairo and the pyramids. As we jogged along (you went on donkeys then), some of

the gentlemen (we boys called them dons, but the phrase was long since changed) fell to talking about Nolan, and someone told the system which was adopted from the first about his books and other reading. As he was almost never permitted to go on shore, even though the vessel lay in port for months, his time at the best hung heavy, and everybody was permitted to lend him books if they were not published in America and made no allusion to it. These were common enough in the old days when people in the other hemisphere talked of the United States as little as we do of Paraguay. He had almost all the foreign papers that came into the ship sooner or later, only somebody must go over them first and cut out any advertisement or stray paragraph that alluded to America. This was a little cruel sometimes, when the back of what was cut out might be as innocent as Hesiod. Right in the midst of one of Napoleon's battles or one of Canning's speeches, poor Nolan would find a great hole because on the back of the page of that paper there had been an advertisement of a packet for New York or a scrap from the president's message. I say this was the first time I ever heard of this plan, which afterwards I had enough and more than enough to do with. I remember it because poor Phillips, who was of the party, as soon as the allusion to reading was made, told a story of something which happened at the Cape of Good Hope on Nolan's first voyage, and it is the only thing I ever knew of that voyage. They had touched at the Cape and had done the civil thing with the English admiral and the fleet, and then, leaving for a long cruise up the Indian Ocean, Phillips had borrowed a lot of English books from an officer, which in those days as indeed in these, was quite a windfall. Among them, as the Devil would order, was *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, which they had all of them heard of but which most of them had never seen. I think it could not have been published long.

Well, nobody thought there could be any risk of anything national in that, though Phillips swore old Shaw had cut out *The Tempest* from Shakespeare before he let Nolan have it because, he said, "the Bermudas ought to be ours and, by Jove, should be one day." So Nolan was permitted to join the circle one afternoon when a lot of them sat on deck smoking and reading aloud. People do not do such things so often now, but when I was young, we got rid of a great deal of time so. Well, so it happened that in his turn Nolan took the book and read to the others, and he read very well as I know. Nobody in the circle knew a line of the poem, only it was all magic and Border chivalry and was ten thousand years ago. Poor Nolan read steadily through the fifth canto, stopped a minute and drank something, and then began, without a thought of what was coming—

"Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,  
Who never to himself hath said—"

It seems impossible to us that anybody ever heard this for the first time,

but all these fellows did then and poor Nolan himself went on, still unconsciously or mechanically—

“This is my own, my native land!”

Then they all saw something was to pay, but he expected to get through, I suppose, turned a little pale, but plunged on—

“Whose heart hath ne’er within him burned,

As home his footsteps he hath turned

From wandering on a foreign strand?—

If such there breathe, go, mark him well,”—

By this time the men were all beside themselves, wishing there was any way to make him turn over two pages, but he had not quite presence of mind for that; he gagged a little, colored crimson, and staggered on—

“For him no minstrel raptures swell;

High though his titles, proud his name,

Boundless his wealth as wish can claim,

Despite these titles, power, and pelf,

The wretch, concentrated all in self,”—and here the poor fellow choked, could not go on, but started up, swung the book into the sea, vanished into his stateroom. “And by Jove,” said Phillips, “we did not see him for two months again. And I had to make up some beggarly story to that English surgeon why I did not return his Walter Scott to him.”

That story shows about the time when Nolan’s braggadocio must have broken down. At first, they said, he took a very high tone, considered his imprisonment a mere farce, affected to enjoy the voyage and all that, but Phillips said that after he came out of his stateroom he never was the same man again. He never read aloud again unless it was the Bible or Shakespeare or something else he was sure of. But it was not that merely. He never entered in with the other young men exactly as a companion again. He was always shy afterwards when I knew him—very seldom spoke unless he was spoken to, except to a very few friends. He lighted up occasionally—I remember late in his life hearing him fairly eloquent on something which had been suggested to him by one of Fléchier’s sermons—but generally he had the nervous, tired look of a heart-wounded man.

When Captain Shaw was coming home—if, as I say, it was Shaw—rather to the surprise of everybody they made one of the Windward Islands and lay off and on for nearly a week. The boys said the officers were sick of salt junk and meant to have turtle soup before they came home. But after several days the *Warren* came to the same rendezvous; they exchanged signals; she sent to Phillips and these homeward bound men letters and papers and told them she was outward bound, perhaps to the Mediterranean, and took poor Nolan and his traps on the boat back to try his second cruise. He looked very blank when he was told to get ready to join her. He had known enough of the signs of the sky to know that till that moment he was going “home.” But this was a distinct evidence of

something he had not thought of, perhaps—that there was no going home for him, even to a prison. And this was the first of some twenty such transfers, which brought him sooner or later into half our best vessels but which kept him all his life at least some hundred miles from the country he had hoped he might never hear of again.

It may have been on that second cruise—it was once when he was up the Mediterranean—that Mrs. Graff, the celebrated Southern beauty of those days, danced with him. They had been lying a long time in the Bay of Naples, and the officers were very intimate in the English fleet and there had been great festivities, and our men thought they must give a great ball on board the ship. How they ever did it on board the *Warren* I am sure I do not know. Perhaps it was not the *Warren*, or perhaps ladies did not take up so much room as they do now. They wanted to use Nolan's stateroom for something and they hated to do it without asking him to the ball, so the captain said they might ask him if they would be responsible that he did not talk with the wrong people, "who would give him intelligence." So the dance went on, the finest party that had ever been known I daresay, for I never heard of a man-of-war ball that was not. For ladies they had the family of the American consul, one or two travelers who had adventured so far, and a nice bevy of English girls and matrons, perhaps Lady Hamilton herself.

Well, different officers relieved each other in standing and talking with Nolan in a friendly way so as to be sure that nobody else spoke to him. The dancing went on with spirit, and after a while even the fellows who took this honorary guard of Nolan ceased to fear any contretemps. Only when some English lady—Lady Hamilton, as I said, perhaps—called for a set of "American dances," an odd thing happened. Everybody then danced contra-dances. The black band, nothing loath, conferred as to what "American dances" were and started off with "Virginia Reel," which they followed with "Money-Musk," which, in its turn in those days, should have been followed by "The Old Thirteen." But just as Dick, the leader, tapped for his fiddles to begin and bent forward, about to say, in true Negro state, "The Old Thirteen, gentlemen and ladies!" as he had said, "Virginnny Reel, if you please!" and "Money-Musk, if you please!" the captain's boy tapped him on the shoulder, whispered to him, and he did not announce the name of the dance; he merely bowed, began on the air, and they all fell to—the officers teaching the English girls the figure but not telling them why it had no name.

But that is not the story I started to tell.

As the dancing went on, Nolan and our fellows all got at ease as I said—so much so that it seemed quite natural for him to bow to that splendid Mrs. Graff, and say, "I hope you have not forgotten me, Miss Rutledge. Shall I have the honor of dancing?"

He did it so quickly that Fellows, who was with him, could not hinder



him. She laughed and said, "I am not Miss Rutledge any longer, Mr. Nolan, but I will dance all the same," just nodded to Fellows as if to say he must leave Mr. Nolan to her and led him off to the place where the dance was forming.

Nolan thought he had got his chance. He had known her at Philadelphia, and at other places had met her, and this was a godsend. You could not talk in contra-dances as you do in cotillions or even in the pauses of waltzing, but there were chances for tongues and sounds as well as for eyes and blushes. He began with her travels, and Europe, and Vesuvius, and the French, and then, when they had worked down and had that long talking time at the bottom of the set, he said boldly—a little pale, she said as she told me the story years after, "And what do you hear from home, Mrs. Graff?"

And that splendid creature looked through him. Jove! how she must have looked through him!

"Home!! Mr. Nolan! I thought you were the man who never wanted to hear of home again!"—and she walked directly up the deck to her husband and left poor Nolan alone as he always was. He did not dance again. I cannot give any history of him in order, nobody can now, and indeed I am not trying to.

These are the traditions which I sort out, as I believe them, from the myths which have been told about this man for forty years. The lies that have been told about him are legion. The fellows used to say he was the "Iron Mask," and poor George Pons went to his grave in the belief that this was the author of "Junius" who was being punished for his celebrated libel on Thomas Jefferson. Pons was not very strong in the historical line.

A happier story than either of these I have told is of the war. That came along soon after. I have heard this affair told in three or four ways—and indeed it may have happened more than once. But which ship it was on I cannot tell. However, in one at least of the great frigate duels with the English, in which the navy was really baptized, it happened that a round-shot from the enemy entered one of our ports square and took right down the officer of the gun himself and almost every man of the gun's crew. Now, you may say what you choose about courage, but that is not a nice thing to see. But as the men who were not killed picked themselves up, and as they and the surgeon's people were carrying off the bodies, there appeared Nolan, in his shirtsleeves, with the rammer in his hand and, just as if he had been the officer, told them off with authority—who should go to the cockpit with the wounded men, who should stay with him—perfectly cheery and with that way which makes men feel sure all is right and is going to be right. And he finished loading the gun with his own hands, aimed it, and bade the men fire. And there he stayed, captain of that gun, keeping those fellows in spirits, till the enemy struck—sitting on the carriage while the gun was cooling though he was exposed all the

time—showing them easier ways to handle heavy shot—making the raw hands laugh at their own blunders—and when the gun cooled again, getting it loaded and fired twice as often as any other gun on the ship. The captain walked forward by way of encouraging the men, and Nolan touched his hat and said, “I am showing them how we do this in the artillery, sir.”

And this is the part of the story where all the legends agree; the commodore said, “I see you do, and I thank you, sir, and I shall never forget this day, sir, and you never shall, sir.”

And after the whole thing was over and he had the Englishman’s sword, in the midst of the state and ceremony of the quarter-deck, he said, “Where is Mr. Nolan? Ask Mr. Nolan to come here.”

And when Nolan came, he said, “Mr. Nolan, we are all very grateful to you today; you are one of us today; you will be named in the despatches.” And then the old man took off his own sword of ceremony and gave it to Nolan and made him put it on. The man told me this who saw it. Nolan cried like a baby, and well he might. He had not worn a sword since that infernal day at Fort Adams. But always afterwards on occasions of ceremony he wore that quaint old French sword of the commodore’s.

The captain did mention him in the despatches. It was always said he asked that he might be pardoned. He wrote a special letter to the Secretary of War. But nothing ever came of it. As I said, that was about the time when they began to ignore the whole transaction at Washington, and when Nolan’s imprisonment began to carry itself on because there was nobody to stop it without any new orders from home.

I have heard it said that he was with Porter when he took possession of the Nukahiwa Islands. Not this Porter, you know, but old Porter, his father, Essex Porter—that is, the old Essex Porter, not this Essex. As an artillery officer who had seen service in the West, Nolan knew more about fortifications, embrasures, ravelins, stockades, and all that than any of them did, and he worked with a right good will in fixing that battery all right. I have always thought it was a pity Porter did not leave him in command there with Gamble. That would have settled all the question about his punishment. We should have kept the islands, and at this moment we should have one station in the Pacific Ocean. Our French friends, too, when they wanted this little watering place, would have found it was pre-occupied. But Madison and the Virginians, of course, flung all that away.

All that was near fifty years ago. If Nolan was thirty then, he must have been near eighty when he died. He looked sixty when he was forty. But he never seemed to me to change a hair afterwards. As I imagine his life, from what I have seen and heard of it, he must have been in every sea and yet almost never on land. He must have known, in a formal way, more officers in our service than any man living knows. He told me once, with a grave smile, that no man in the world lived so methodical a life as he.

"You know the boys say I am the Iron Mask, and you know how busy he was." He said it did not do for anyone to try to read all the time, more than to do anything else all the time, but that he read just five hours a day. "Then," he said, "I keep up my notebooks, writing in them at such and such hours from what I have been reading, and I include in these my scrapbooks." These were very curious indeed. He had six or eight, of different subjects. There was one of History, one of Natural Science, one which he called Odds and Ends. But they were not merely books of extracts from newspapers. They had bits of plants and ribbons, shells tied on and carved scraps of bone and wood, which he had taught the men to cut for him, and they were beautifully illustrated. He drew admirably. He had some of the funniest drawings there, and some of the most pathetic, that I have ever seen in my life. I wonder who will have Nolan's scrapbooks.

Well, he said his reading and his notes were his profession and that they took five hours and two hours respectively of each day. "Then," said he, "every man should have a diversion as well as a profession. My Natural History is my diversion." That took two hours a day more. The men used to bring him birds and fish, but on a long cruise he had to satisfy himself with centipedes and cockroaches and such small game. He was the only naturalist I ever met who knew anything about the habits of the housefly and the mosquito. All those people can tell you whether they are *lepidoptera* or *steptopotera*, but as for telling how you can get rid of them or how they get away from you when you strike them—why Linnæus knew as little of that as John Foy the idiot did. These nine hours made Nolan's regular daily "occupation." The rest of the time he talked or walked. Till he grew very old, he went aloft a great deal. He always kept up his exercise, and I never heard that he was ill. If any other man was ill, he was the kindest nurse in the world, and he knew more than half the surgeons do. Then if anybody was sick or died, or if the captain wanted him to on any other occasion, he was always ready to read prayers. I have said that he read beautifully.

My own acquaintance with Philip Nolan began six or eight years after the English war, on my first voyage after I was appointed a midshipman. It was in the first days after our Slave-Trade treaty while the Reigning House, which was still the House of Virginia, had still a sort of sentimentalism about the suppression of the horrors of the Middle Passage, and something was sometimes done that way. We were in the South Atlantic on that business. From the time I joined, I believe I thought Nolan was a sort of lay chaplain—a chaplain with a blue coat. I never asked about him. Everything in the ship was strange to me. I knew it was green to ask questions, and I suppose I thought there was a Plain-Buttons on every ship. We had him to dine in our mess once a week, and the caution was given that on that day nothing was to be said

about home. But if they had told us not to say anything about the planet Mars or the Book of Deuteronomy, I should not have asked why; there were a great many things which seemed to me to have as little reason. I first came to understand anything about "the man without a country" one day when we overhauled a dirty little schooner which had slaves on board. An officer was sent to take charge of her, and after a few minutes he sent back his boat to ask that someone might be sent him who could speak Portuguese. We were all looking over the rail when the message came, and we all wished we could interpret when the captain asked who spoke Portuguese. But none of the officers did, and just as the captain was sending forward to ask if any of the people could, Nolan stepped out and said he should be glad to interpret if the captain wished, as he understood the language. The captain thanked him, fitted out another boat with him, and in this boat it was my luck to go.

When we got there, it was such a scene as you seldom see and never want to. Nastiness beyond account, and chaos run loose in the midst of the nastiness. There were not a great many of the Negroes, but by way of making what there were understand that they were free, Vaughan had had their handcuffs and ankle cuffs knocked off, and for convenience' sake was putting them upon the rascals of the schooner's crew. The Negroes were, most of them, out of the hold and swarming all round the dirty deck with a central throng surrounding Vaughan and addressing him in every dialect and patois of a dialect from the Zulu click up to the Parisian of Beledeljereed.

As we came on deck, Vaughan looked down from a hogshead on which he had mounted in desperation, and said, "For God's love, is there anybody who can make these wretches understand something? The men gave them rum, and that did not quiet them. I knocked that big fellow down twice, and that did not soothe him. And then I talked Choctaw to all of them together, and I'll be hanged if they understood that as well as they understood the English."

Nolan said he could speak Portuguese, and one or two fine-looking Kroomen were dragged out who, as it had been found already, had worked for the Portuguese on the coast at Fernando Po.

"Tell them they are free," said Vaughan, "and tell them that these rascals are to be hanged as soon as we can get rope enough."

Nolan "put that into Spanish"—that is, he explained it in such Portuguese as the Kroomen could understand—and they in turn to such of the Negroes as could understand them. Then there was such a yell of delight, clenching of fists, leaping and dancing, kissing of Nolan's feet, and a general rush made to the hogshead by way of spontaneous worship of Vaughan as the *deus ex machina* of the occasion.

"Tell them," said Vaughan, well pleased, "that I will take them all to Cape Palmas."

This did not answer so well. Cape Palmas was practically as far from the homes of most of them as New Orleans or Rio Janeiro was; that is, they would be eternally separated from home there. And their interpreters, as we could understand, instantly said, "*Ah, non Palmas,*" and began to propose infinite other expedients in most voluble language. Vaughan was rather disappointed at this result of his liberality and asked Nolan eagerly what they said. The drops stood on poor Nolan's white forehead as he hushed the men down, and said, "He says, 'Not Palmas.' He says, 'Take us home, take us to our own country, take us to our own house, take us to our own pickaninnies and our own women.' He says he has an old father and mother who will die if they do not see him. And this one says he left his people all sick and paddled down to Fernando to beg the white doctor to come and help them and that these devils caught him in the bay just in sight of home and that he has never seen anybody from home since then. And this one says," choked out Nolan, "that he has not heard a word from his home in six months while he has been locked up in an infernal barracoon."

Vaughan always said he grew gray himself while Nolan struggled through this interpretation. I, who did not understand anything of the passion involved in it, saw that the very elements were melting with fervent heat and that something was to pay somewhere. Even the Negroes themselves stopped howling as they saw Nolan's agony and Vaughan's almost equal agony of sympathy. As quick as he could get words, he said, "Tell them yes, yes, yes; tell them they shall go to the mountains of the Moon if they will. If I sail the schooner through the Great White Desert, they shall go home!"

And after some fashion Nolan said so. And then they all fell to kissing him again and wanted to rub his nose with theirs.

But he could not stand it long, and getting Vaughan to say he might go back, he beckoned me down into our boat. As we lay back in the stern-sheets and the men gave way, he said to me, "Youngster, let that show you what it is to be without a family, without a home, and without a country. And if you are ever tempted to say a word or to do a thing that shall put a bar between you and your family, your home, and your country, pray God in his mercy to take you that instant home to his own heaven. Stick by your family, boy; forget you have a self, while you do everything for them. Think of your home, boy; write and send and talk about it. Let it be nearer and nearer to your thought the farther you have to travel from it, and rush back to it when you are free as that poor black slave is doing now. And for your country, boy," and the words rattled in his throat, "and for that flag," and he pointed to the ship, "never dream a dream but of serving her as she bids you though the service carry you through a thousand hells. No matter what happens to you, no more matter who flatters you or who abuses you, never look at another flag, never let a night

pass but you pray God to bless that flag. Remember, boy, that behind all these men you have to do with, behind officers and government and people even, there is the Country Herself, your Country, and that you belong to Her as you belong to your own mother. Stand by Her, boy, as you would stand by your mother if those devils there had got hold of her today!"

I was frightened to death by his calm, hard passion, but I blundered out that I would, by all that was holy, and that I had never thought of doing anything else. He hardly seemed to hear me, but he did, almost in a whisper, say, "O, if anybody had said so to me when I was of your age!"

I think it was this half-confidence of his, which I never abused for I never told this story till now, which afterward made us great friends. He was very kind to me. Often he sat up, or even got up, at night, to walk the deck with me when it was my watch. He explained to me a great deal of my mathematics, and I owe to him my taste for mathematics. He lent me books and helped me about my reading. He never alluded so directly to his story again, but from one and another officer I have learned, in thirty years, what I am telling. When we parted from him in St. Thomas harbor at the end of our cruise, I was more sorry than I can tell. I was very glad to meet him again in 1830, and later in life, when I thought I had some influence in Washington, I moved heaven and earth to have him discharged. But it was like getting a ghost out of prison. They pretended there was no such man and never was such a man. They will say so at the department now! Perhaps they do not know. It will not be the first thing in the service of which the department appears to know nothing!

There is a story that Nolan met Burr once on one of our vessels when a party of Americans came on board in the Mediterranean. But this I believe to be a lie, or rather it is a myth, *ben trovato*, involving a tremendous blowing-up with which he sunk Burr—asking him how he liked to be "without a country." But it is clear from Burr's life that nothing of the sort could have happened, and I mention this only as an illustration of the stories which get a-going where there is the least mystery at bottom.

So poor Philip Nolan had his wish fulfilled. I know but one fate more dreadful; it is the fate reserved for those men who shall have one day to exile themselves from their country because they have attempted her ruin and shall have at the same time to see the prosperity and honor to which she rises when she has rid herself of them and their iniquities. The wish of poor Nolan, as we all learned to call him not because his punishment was too great but because his repentance was so clear, was precisely the wish of every Bragg and Beauregard who broke a soldier's oath two years ago and of every Maury and Barron who broke a sailor's. I do not know how often they have repented. I do know that they have done all that in them lay that they might have no country—that all the honors, associations, memories, and hopes which belong to "country" might be broken up into little shreds and distributed to the winds. I know, too, that their pun-



ishment as they vegetate through what is left of life to them in wretched Boulognes and Leicester Squares, where they are destined to upbraid each other till they die, will have all the agony of Nolan's with the added pang that everyone who sees them will see them to despise and to execrate them. They will have their wish, like him.

For him, poor fellow, he repented of his folly and then, like a man, submitted to the fate he had asked for. He never intentionally added to the difficulty or delicacy of the charge of those who had him in hold. Accidents would happen, but they never happened from his fault. Lieutenant Truxton told me that when Texas was annexed there was a careful discussion among the officers, whether they should get hold of Nolan's handsome set of maps and cut Texas out of it—from the map of the world and the map of Mexico. The United States had been cut out when the atlas was bought for him. But it was voted, rightly enough, that to do this would be virtually to reveal to him what had happened or, as Harry Cole said, to make him think Old Burr had succeeded. So it was from no fault of Nolan's that a great botch happened at my own table when for a short time I was in command of the *George Washington* corvette on the South American station. We were lying in the La Plata, and some of the officers, who had been on shore and had just joined again, were entertaining us with accounts of their misadventures in riding the half-wild horses of Buenos Ayres. Nolan was at table and was in an unusually bright and talkative mood. Some story of a tumble reminded him of an adventure of his own when he was catching wild horses in Texas with his adventurous cousin at a time when he must have been quite a boy. He told the story with a good deal of spirit—so much so that the silence which often follows a good story hung over the table for an instant, to be broken by Nolan himself. For he asked perfectly unconsciously, "Pray, what has become of Texas? After the Mexicans got their independence, I thought that province of Texas would come forward very fast. It is really one of the finest regions on earth; it is the Italy of this continent. But I have not seen or heard a word of Texas for near twenty years."

There were two Texan officers at the table. The reason he had never heard of Texas was that Texas and her affairs had been painfully cut out of his newspapers since Austin began his settlements so that, while he read of Honduras and Tamaulipas, and, till quite lately, of California, this virgin province in which his brother had traveled so far and, I believe, had died had ceased to be to him. Waters and Williams, the two Texas men, looked grimly at each other and tried not to laugh. Edward Morris had his attention attracted by the third link in the chain of the captain's chandelier. Watrous was seized with a convulsion of sneezing. Nolan himself saw that something was to pay, he did not know what. And I, as master of the feast, had to say, "Texas is out of the map, Mr. Nolan. Have you seen Captain Back's curious account of Sir Thomas Roe's Welcome?"

After that cruise I never saw Nolan again. I wrote to him at least twice a year, for in that voyage we became even confidentially intimate, but he never wrote to me. The other men tell me that in those fifteen years he aged very fast, as well he might indeed, but that he was still the same gentle, uncomplaining, silent sufferer that he ever was, bearing as best he could his self-appointed punishment—rather less social perhaps with new men whom he did not know, but more anxious, apparently, than ever to serve and befriend and teach the boys, some of whom fairly seemed to worship him. And now it seems the dear old fellow is dead. He has found a home at last, and a country.

Since writing this, and while considering whether or no I would print it as a warning to the young Nolans and Vallandighams and Tatnalls of today of what it is to throw away a country, I have received from Danforth, who is on board the *Levant*, a letter which gives an account of Nolan's last hours. It removes all my doubts about telling this story.

To understand the first words of the letter, the nonprofessional reader should remember that after 1817 the position of every officer who had Nolan in charge was one of the greatest delicacy. The government had failed to renew the order of 1807 regarding him. What was a man to do? Should he let him go? What, then, if he were called to account by the department for violating the order of 1807? Should he keep him? What, then, if Nolan should be liberated someday and should bring an action for false imprisonment or kidnapping against every man who had had him in charge?

I urged and pressed this upon Southard, and I have reason to think that other officers did the same thing. But the secretary always said, as they so often do at Washington, that there were no special orders to give and that we must act on our own judgment. That means, "If you succeed, you will be sustained; if you fail, you will be disavowed." Well, as Danforth says, all that is over now, though I do not know but I expose myself to a criminal prosecution on the evidence of the very revelation I am making.

Here is the letter:

LEVANT, 2° 2' S. at 131° W.

Dear Fred:—I try to find heart and life to tell you that it is all over with dear old Nolan. I have been with him on this voyage more than I ever was, and I can understand wholly now the way in which you used to speak of the dear old fellow. I could see that he was not strong, but I had no idea the end was so near. The doctor has been watching him very carefully, and yesterday morning came to me and told me that Nolan was not so well and had not left his stateroom—a thing I never remember before. He had let the doctor come and see him as he lay there—the first time the doctor had been in the stateroom—and he said he should like to see me. Oh dear! do you remember the mysteries we boys used to invent

about his room in the old *Intrepid* days? Well, I went in, and there, to be sure, the poor fellow lay in his berth, smiling pleasantly as he gave me his hand but looking very frail. I could not help a glance round, which showed me what a little shrine he had made of the box he was lying in. The Stars and Stripes were triced up above and around a picture of Washington, and he had painted a majestic eagle, with lightning blazing from his beak and his foot just clasping the whole globe, which his wings overshadowed. The dear old boy saw my glance and said, with a sad smile, "Here, you see, I have a country!" And then he pointed to the foot of his bed, where I had not seen before a great map of the United States as he had drawn it from memory and which he had there to look upon as he lay. Quaint, queer old names were on it, in large letters: "Indiana Territory," "Mississippi Territory," and "Louisiana Territory" as I suppose our fathers learned such things, but the old fellow had patched in Texas, too. He had carried his western boundary all the way to the Pacific, but on that shore he had defined nothing.

"O Danforth," he said, "I know I am dying. I cannot get home. Surely you will tell me something now?—Stop! Stop! Do not speak till I say what I am sure you know, that there is not in this ship, that there is not in America—God bless her!—a more loyal man than I. There cannot be a man who loves the old flag as I do, or prays for it as I do, or hopes for it as I do. There are thirty-four stars in it now, Danforth. I thank God for that, though I do not know what their names are. There has never been one taken away: I thank God for that. I know by that that there has never been any successful Burr. O Danforth, Danforth," he sighed out, "how like a wretched night's dream a boy's idea of personal fame or of separate sovereignty seems when one looks back on it after such a life as mine! But tell me—tell me something—tell me everything, Danforth, before I die!"

Ingham, I swear to you that I felt like a monster that I had not told him everything before. Danger or no danger, delicacy or no delicacy, who was I that I should have been acting the tyrant all this time over this dear, sainted old man who had years ago expiated, in his whole manhood's life, the madness of a boy's treason? "Mr. Nolan," said I, "I will tell you everything you ask about. Only where shall I begin?"

Oh, the blessed smile that crept over his white face!—and he pressed my hand and said, "God bless you! Tell me their names," he said, and he pointed to the stars on the flag. "The last I know is Ohio. My father lived in Kentucky. But I have guessed Michigan and Indiana and Mississippi—that was where Fort Adams is—they make twenty. But where are your other fourteen? You have not cut up any of the old ones, I hope?"

Well, that was not a bad text, and I told him the names in as good order as I could and he bade me take down his beautiful map and draw them in as I best could with my pencil. He was wild with delight about

Texas, told me how his cousin died there; he had marked a gold cross near where he supposed his grave was, and he had guessed at Texas. Then he was delighted as he saw California and Oregon; that, he said, he had suspected partly because he had never been permitted to land on that shore though the ships were there so much. "And the men," said he, laughing, "brought off a good deal besides furs." Then he went back—heavens, how far!—to ask about the *Chesapeake*, and what was done to Barron for surrendering her to the *Leopard*, and whether Burr ever tried again—and he ground his teeth with the only passion he showed. But in a moment that was over, and he said, "God forgive me, for I am sure I forgive him." Then he asked about the old war—told me the true story of his serving the gun the day we took the *Java*—asked about dear old Dávid Porter as he called him. Then he settled down more quietly, and very happily, to hear me tell in an hour the history of fifty years.

How I wished it had been somebody who knew something! But I did as well as I could. I told him of the English war. I told him about Fulton and the steamboat beginning. I told him about old Scott and Jackson; told him all I could think of about the Mississippi and New Orleans and Texas and his own old Kentucky. And do you know, he asked who was in command of the Legion of the West? I told him it was a very gallant officer named Grant and that, by our last news, he was about to establish his headquarters at Vicksburg. Then, "Where was Vicksburg?" I worked that out on the map; it was about a hundred miles, more or less, above his old Fort Adams, and I thought Fort Adams must be a ruin now. "It must be at old Vick's plantation, at Walnut Hills," said he; "well, that is a change!"

I tell you, Ingham, it was a hard thing to condense the history of half a century into that talk with a sick man. And I do not now know what I told him—of emigration and the means of it—of steamboats and railroads and telegraphs—of inventions and books and literature—of the colleges and West Point and the Naval School—but with the queerest interruptions that ever you heard. You see, it was Robinson Crusoe asking all the accumulated questions of fifty-six years!

I remember he asked, all of a sudden, who was president now, and when I told him, he asked if Old Abe was General Benjamin Lincoln's son. He said he met old General Lincoln, when he was quite a boy himself, at some Indian treaty. I said no, that Old Abe was a Kentuckian like himself, but I could not tell him of what family; he had worked up from the ranks. "Good for him!" cried Nolan, "I am glad of that. As I have brooded and wondered, I have thought our danger was in keeping up those regular successions in the first families." Then I got talking about my visit to Washington. I told him of meeting the Oregon congressman, Harding; I told him about the Smithsonian and the Exploring Expedition; I told him about the Capitol and the statues for the pediment and Crawford's *Lib-*

erty and Greenough's *Washington*: Ingham, I told him everything I could think of that would show the grandeur of his country and its prosperity, but I could not make up my mouth to tell him a word about this infernal rebellion!

And he drank it in and enjoyed it as I cannot tell you. He grew more and more silent, yet I never thought he was tired or faint. I gave him a glass of water, but he just wet his lips and told me not to go away. Then he asked me to bring the Presbyterian Book of Public Prayer which lay there and said, with a smile, that it would open at the right place—and so it did. There was his double red mark down the page, and I knelt down and read, and he repeated with me, "For ourselves and our country, O gracious God, we thank Thee, that, notwithstanding our manifold transgressions of Thy holy laws, Thou hast continued to us Thy marvellous kindness,"—and so to the end of that thanksgiving. Then he turned to the end of the same book, and I read the words more familiar to me: "Most heartily we beseech Thee with Thy favor to behold and bless Thy servant, the President of the United States, and all others in authority,"—and the rest of the Episcopal collect. "Danforth," said he, "I have repeated those prayers night and morning, it is now fifty-five years." And then he said he would go to sleep. He bent me down over him and kissed me, and he said, "Look in my Bible, Danforth, when I am gone." And I went away.

But I had no thought it was the end. I thought he was tired and would sleep. I knew he was happy, and I wanted him to be alone.

But in an hour, when the doctor went in gently, he found Nolan had breathed his life away with a smile. He had something pressed close to his lips. It was his father's badge of the Order of the Cincinnati.

We looked in his Bible, and there was a slip of paper at the place where he had marked the text:

"They desire a country, even a heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for He hath prepared for them a city."

On this slip of paper he had written:

"Bury me in the sea; it has been my home, and I love it. But will not someone set up a stone for my memory at Fort Adams or at Orleans, that my disgrace may not be more than I ought to bear? Say on it:

In Memory of

PHILIP NOLAN,

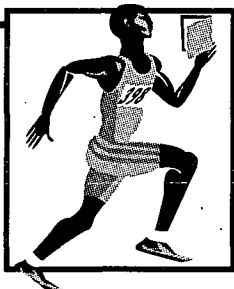
Lieutenant in the Army of the United States

HE LOVED HIS COUNTRY AS NO OTHER MAN HAS LOVED HER;

BUT NO MAN DESERVED LESS AT HER HANDS.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



**T**he next best thing to visiting Venice is going there from your armchair under the knowledgeable and loving eye of Edward Sklepowich's amateur sleuth, Urbino Macintyre. The newest title is **Deadly to the Sight** (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$23.95), a special treat in that it centers around the picturesque island of Burano, home of the ancient art of lacemaking. The novel opens with Urbino's return from an extended stay in Morocco and accompanied by a houseguest, Habib, a young Arab artist whom Urbino has offered to sponsor. Urbino's reunion with his old and dear friend the countess at their favorite spot in their favorite coffeehouse is marred, however, by the older woman's tension. She has been approached by a spidery old lace-maker from Burano who is offering to sell her some information, and Barbara suspects blackmail over something in her late husband's past. Further, she has still not adjusted to several staff changes in her household, and her best friends, an Italian couple, have separated. Too soon Barbara's suspicions seep into Urbino's consciousness, leading to his doubts about Habib. That changes when Habib is arrested on charges of murder. Enjoy the books in this series as you would savor a travelogue that comes with good company, good food, and a bit of a mystery on the side.

For those of you who like some *X-Files* twists to your suspense, look no further than F. Paul Wilson's Repairman Jack series. The latest, **Hosts** (Gauntlet, \$25.95), serves up Jack's scariest enemy to date: a virus that spreads from mind to mind, destroying its victim's personal identity and replacing it with . . . well, I don't want to give away the crucial details. Suffice it to say that Wilson's combination of science fiction, action-adventure, a New York setting, and an engaging first-person narration is irresistible. The usual warning here: don't begin this book at night unless you're planning to stay up very, very late.

On an entirely different note, cosy mystery fans who like to go behind the scenes will probably warm to Janis Harrison's heroine in **Lilies**

(continued on page 142)

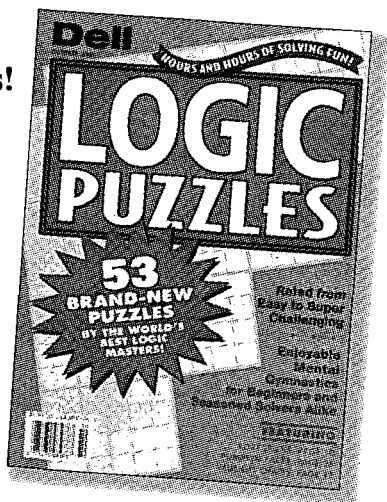


# Dell Logic Puzzles Direct to Your Door!

If you love solving mysteries,  
you'll love **Dell Logic Puzzles!**

Each issue delivers more  
than 50 spell-binding logic  
problems by the world's  
best logic masters.

Subscribe today and you'll  
get every intriguing issue  
delivered direct to your door  
and save 10%. Six issues,  
just \$15.97.



To charge your order by phone, call toll free:

1-800-925-1701 Outside the U.S.A.: 1-303-678-8747

Mail to: Dell Logic Puzzles

PO Box 54360,  
Boulder, CO 80322

☒ **YES!** Enter my subscription to Dell Logic Puzzles (DLGC)  
as indicated below.

☐ 1 year, (6 issues) \$15.97

☐ 2 years, (12 issues) \$28.97

☐ My payment is enclosed (U.S. funds)

☐ Bill me

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
(Please Print)

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

Please allow 6 to 8 weeks for delivery of first issue. Canadian and foreign orders add  
\$5 per year (U.S. funds). Offer expires 12/31/02.

5P32

(continued from page 140)

**That Fester** (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$23.95). Bretta Solomon, proprietor of a small Missouri town's florist shop and widow of its late sheriff, makes her third outing in this adventure. It takes her to nearby Branson, this year's site of the regional florists' convention. Bretta has agreed to run one of the weekend's activities, the design contest; not surprisingly, it is bringing out the worst in some of her colleagues. At the same time she learns that the parents of a young suicide victim from her hometown want to meet her at the hotel: their note indicates that they hope their respected sheriff's widow can get some kind of justice for them, as the system has failed. Alas, they die first. Coincidence—or murder?

Was there ever a writer as dependable as Anne Perry? Her latest Thomas and Charlotte Pitt novel, **Southampton Row** (Ballantine, \$25), is as rich in Victorian detail and as clever in plot as the previous twenty-one novels in this series. If you read the last Pitt book, you know that Thomas foiled a highly placed member of the secret society known as the Inner Circle in his bid to overthrow the monarchy. Ironically, Charles Voisey came out of the affair with a medal from the queen—and a bitter hatred for Pitt. His first priority, however, is to win the Tory seat in Parliament in the upcoming general election. As Thomas's superior suspects, this probably bodes ill for the opposing candidate, a likable and attractive young Liberal. Sure enough, a successful psychic is murdered in her home following a seance attended by the Liberal's wife. True to form, Perry creates her fiction around actual historic incidences and draws upon the manners and culture of the times to motivate her characters as well as to move her plot. If you like Perry, you'll be thrilled to see that there's a new book, and relieved to learn that the quality is as high as ever.

**Sacrament of Lies** (BlueHen, \$23.95) by Elizabeth Dewberry is simply structured: its protagonist recounts her growing belief that she is either surrounded by conspirators or growing mad. Grayson Guilloiry's father is governor, an ambitious man saddled with an emotionally disturbed wife, until Grayson's mother dies. All too soon, in the grieving young woman's eyes, her father remarries his dead wife's sister. When Grayson is wooed and won by her father's faithful protégé, Carter, Grayson's suspicions are lulled. Then she finds the videotape her mother made for her right before her death. This is a small novel with a fairly unsurprising ending, but Dewberry compellingly evokes the claustrophobic effects of fear and suspicion.

# CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

Alfred Hitchcock April '02

Advertise to the world's largest mystery magazine audience with our Alfred Hitchcock/Ellery Queen combined classified section. Ad rates per issue: \$4.95 per word (10 word minimum), \$350 per column inch (2.25 inch maximum). Special introductory offer: Buy two ads and receive a third ad FREE. Send orders to: Dell Magazines, Classified Department, 475 Park Ave. S., 11th Floor, New York, New York 10016. Direct inquiries to: (212) 686-7188; Fax: (212) 686-7414.

## BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

**FREE CATALOG.** Used paper and hardcover mysteries. Books West, POB 417760, Sacramento, CA 95841-7760. Visa/MC/Amex/Discover.

**FREE LISTS.** Quality used mystery paperbacks. Collections purchased. Steve Lewis, 62 Chestnut, Newington, CT 06111.

**MYSTERY ADDICTS!** Free catalog! New and recycled detective fiction. Grave Matters, Box 32192-C, Cincinnati, OH 45232, [www.gravematters.com](http://www.gravematters.com)

**MYSTERY HOUSE BOOK SHOPPE.** Used Books. On-line catalog. <http://www.mysteryhousebooks.com>

## BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

**VINTAGE MYSTERIES.** Firsts, reading copies, plus our own reprints of classic books. Rue Morgue, POB 4119, Boulder, CO 80306.

## GENERAL INTEREST

**Murder by Design.** Interactive Mystery Events. Weekends, Dinners, Conventions. Let us make your next event one everyone will "die" to attend! Call 888/800-4623 or visit our website at <http://doorway.to/murder>

## WORK AT HOME

**ATTENTION: WORK FROM HOME.** Potential: \$2000 TO \$5000 PER MONTH. Must be 18 years of age or older. 1-800-896-7164 code 623

## FREE AD OFFER FOR OUR MYSTERY COMBO

**PLACE A CLASSIFIED AD  
IN OUR NEXT TWO ISSUES AND RECEIVE A THIRD AD FREE!**

Your ad will reach a combined audience of 200,000 readers in our outstanding publications—**Ellery Queen and Alfred Hitchcock** mystery magazines.

Call today for a new rate card.

**DELL MAGAZINES CLASSIFIED DEPARTMENT  
475 Park Avenue South, 11th Floor, NY, NY 10016  
Call: (212) 686-7188 • Fax: (212) 686-7414**

# THE STORY THAT WON

The November Mysterious Photograph contest was won by James A. Stewart of Laurel, Maryland. Honorable mentions go to Glenn Weissinger of North Richland Hills, Texas; R. J. Stevens of Calgary, Alberta, Canada; D. B. Corrigan of Orlando, Florida; Doc Finch of Zion, Illinois;



Jacque Juers of Wilmington, Delaware; Andrew McAllister of Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada; Vicki A. Daly of Burlington, Ontario, Canada; Ann Riddle of Alameda, California; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; and W. B. Borrebach of Newtown Square, Pennsylvania.

---

## CREAM IN HIS COFFEE by James A. Stewart

---

"So, who's the Mad Poisoner?" The inspector brought the coffee cup up to his lips as he asked the question.

"You haven't figured it out?" Miss Marble asked.

"Sorry."

"Then you probably shouldn't drink your coffee," Miss Marble said, with a hint of laughter that gave the good inspector chills.

He didn't quite understand the situation, but the Mad Poisoner did. Saundra Skelton shot up from her chair, skidding across the room as she sped from Miss Marble's house—into the waiting arms of Sergeant Sullivan. Soon handcuffs were on Saundra's wrists, and she was led to a waiting police car.

"But the Twelve Dials Society still had seven members alive, so how did you know Saundra Skelton was guilty?" the inspector asked Miss Marble. "And don't tell me it was elementary."

"Actually, it was calculus and geometry, with a conversion from Greenwich Mean Time to local time thrown in," Miss Marble said. "More secondary, or even collegiate. But easy for a retired math teacher."

She sniffed at the coffeepot and frowned. Miss Marble didn't like her coffee with arsenic. "Pour that out in the street," she commanded the inspector. "Otherwise someone might drink it."

The chastened inspector obeyed.

Sergeant Sullivan picked up the pitcher of cream and started to follow.

"What are you doing?" Miss Marble asked.

"The inspector always takes his coffee with a bit of cream," he replied.

# 6 Issues, Just \$9.97!



Subscribe today to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and you'll get every intriguing issue delivered directly to your door.

**Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine** leads the genre in critical acclaim with more than 50 major awards and nominations just since 1990! With suspenseful stories from the honor roll of mystery and crime fiction's great writers PLUS mystery limericks, poems and cartoons, book reviews, and an occasional mystery crossword!

**SAVE 40%!**

To order by charge card, call toll-free:

**1-800-333-3311**

Outside the U.S.A.: 1-850-682-7644



**Ellery Queen, P.O. Box 54052,  
Boulder CO, 80322-4052**

Please allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery of your first issue. Outside U.S.A.: Add \$4 per year for shipping and handling. All orders must be paid in U.S. funds. \*We publish a double issue once a year which counts as two issues toward your subscription.

5E10



**TheMysteryPlace.com**

**Your web source for  
mystery fiction.**

Visit [www.TheMysteryPlace.com](http://www.TheMysteryPlace.com), home of the leading short-fiction mystery magazines. Log on and you'll enjoy:

- Full stories on-line
- Trivia contests
- Readers' Forum
- Award lists
- Book reviews
- Mystery puzzles

**And more!**

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S  
**Mystery**  
MAGAZINE

**ELLERY QUEEN**  
**MYSTERY MAGAZINE**

Visit us at [www.themysteryplace.com](http://www.themysteryplace.com)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED